

Evangelism As Salesmanship?

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D. JAMES KENNEDY, EVANGELISM EXPLOSION.

Foreword by Billy Graham, Wheaton, Illinois.

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EVANGELISM HAS OFTEN BEEN COMPARED to salesmanship. Now D. James Kennedy — who once had a promising future with the Arthur Murray Dancing School organization — has united the most basic rules of salesmanship with a simplified version of the Anselmic picture (vicarious satisfaction) of the atoning work of Christ. Each contains many valid and powerful insights and Kennedy's combination of the two provides an impressive and apparently effective technique for evangelism. Such strengths have led many Lutheran pastors and congregations to adopt the Kennedy program for evangelism.

However direct salesmanship can also be unevangelical and the Anselmic picture of the atonement is a limited perspective on the work of Christ. As a result, the gospel presented by the Kennedy program is less than adequate and serious questions need to be raised about the program before it is adopted by Lutheran congregations.

There are valid emphases in the Kennedy program. Kennedy does not merely exhort Christians to be evangelists. Rather he trains them. He does not merely tell people how to evangelize. Rather he takes them along and shows them how he himself does it. He is willing to expose himself to their evaluation. And even though Kennedy himself sometimes fails to make the conversion, he succeeds often enough to give his trainees the confidence that evangelism is possible and that this method will work. Any Christian will rejoice at this approach — at least any Christian who has been subjected to impassioned exhortations to evangelize which always made him feel guilty but never helped him to act. And every clergyman who has exhorted his people to evangelize with-

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out being able to help them because he himself didn't know how, will respond enthusiastically to the possibility of receiving such training. On this point alone, the Kennedy program has a large potential audience. And even if we cannot accept this particular program, Kennedy sets a high standard for any approach that may be offered as an alternative.

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The confidence derived from training is important but the evangelist — like any other salesman — must also be motivated. Kennedy offers no commissions but he does offer instant meaning to those who feel that the meaning of life depends on radically changing the life of someone else. In addition, he offers the respect and approval of fellow Christians. For this reason, no one works alone in the Kennedy program. Evangelists are trained in three-person teams and eventually are promoted by being made trainers of such teams. Each person is supported and motivated by two others at the level at which the work is done.

Such confidence and motivation are maintained by reasonably frequent successes. Only reasonably "warm" prospects are assigned: the method works best on those who have already visited the congregation's worship service and invited a visit by leaving their name and address (p. 15). "Cold" or canvass-type calls are to be avoided as much as possible. After the call, every success is recognized and rewarded with approval within the group and with promotion in the organizational structure. Kennedy's emphasis on providing successful experiences for evangelists and providing for their care and support are obvious insights that are frequently neglected in the life of the church.

In a similar way, the Kennedy method translates the standard outlines of the direct sales "pitch" into evangelical language. The rules are simple: Find out if people already have (or know they have) what you are selling — in this case, the capacity to state their faith in terms of justification by faith without works. First ask them if they will go to heaven if they die tonight. If they answer, "No," proceed to the next step. If they answer, "Yes," ask "Why?" If they in any way rely on their works, also proceed to the next step and offer them something for nothing — in this case, salvation. Pay as little attention to the other aspects of the deal as possible — in this case, a single-minded focus on a simple statement of the gospel is required. State but do not emphasize the demands made on the buyer — in this case, repentance and the new life — he will find out about that soon enough. Rather push for an agreement to accept the gift and for commitment to the rather vague terms of the contract. Have every agreement reconfirmed as soon as possible and involve a variety of people so that it is increasingly difficult to retract the commitment. The "follow-up" process (pp. 139-169) gradually but firmly acquaints the professed convert with his commitments to the church and the congregational program.

The free grace of God in Jesus seems to be a natural for such a direct sales approach to evangelism. The gift is valuable, it is really free, and when received it will prove to be even better than the salesman promised. No one else in direct sales can make that statement. Seen in these terms, the gospel may be seen as the ultimate fulfillment of all buyers' hopes and of all salesmen's promises.

However, other comparisons make us aware of potential weaknesses in Kennedy's approach. Since the method works for a certain number of people regardless of the product, it is not necessary to focus clearly on what is given and received. Neither the salesman nor the customer needs to know what the product really is. Anyone who dresses neatly, shines his shoes, gets rid of bad breath, finishes the pitch, and keeps on making calls, will make sales. Kennedy generously shares these and similar "trade secrets" with us (pp. 58-60, 81-98, 107-109). And anyone who responds positively to door-to-door salesmen has a reasonably good chance of accepting the gospel along with the vacuum cleaners, encyclopedias, aluminum siding, and furnace repairs.

This dimension of the method becomes clear in Kennedy's final letter to people who have not made a positive response to an evangelism team (p. 182). The possibility of a long-term pastoral relationship is only referred to in passing. In comparison to the initial interview, hardly anything is said about the gospel. The prospect is reminded that he has turned down a free gift and that the offer may one day be "totally withdrawn." Every encyclopedia salesman is familiar with the dynamics of this technique.

Similarly, Kennedy's program is most detailed in its early stages. There are some suggestions for

the care of converts after their conversion (pp. 17, 139-168), but — as in traditional revival programs — the focus is on decision rather than growth. Responsibility for pastoral care is placed upon a rather rudimentary lay organization. Lutheran pastors will probably want to make extensive additions to the Kennedy program at this point.

Kennedy's reliance on the inherent attraction of the free gift simplifies the task of evangelism. The preaching of repentance and the forgiveness of sins is reduced to a sales technique. The discussion of "Jesus' use of the 'Five Laws of Selling'" is most instructive:

These are the five great Laws of Selling: Attention, Interest, Desire, Conviction, and Close. Did salesmen invent these? No, they just extracted them. They learned that is the way to move people to action. This is what Jesus did, for example, with the woman at the well (p. 58).

These laws of selling are effective apart from the product. And it frequently seems that it is they and not the gospel that work faith. As a result, the evangelist need not become involved in any analysis of the prospect's personal situation or identification of his spiritual need. One advantage of this is that Kennedy can recruit his evangelists from his new converts who are relatively inexperienced in Christian faith and life. This source guarantees a steady stream of new trainees and their increasing number is the "explosion" which the Kennedy program hopes to bring about in the church: "It is more important to train a soul-winner than to win a soul" (p. 7).

Kennedy's gospel is a very elementary version of Anselm's description of the work of Christ in terms of vicarious satisfaction. It is not wrong, but it is incomplete. Kennedy has something to say to people who are consciously trying to work their way into heaven or who have given up on the attempt because they have failed. Such are offered a gospel of vicarious satisfaction. But Kennedy has no gospel of redemption as does Luther's explanation of the Second Article of the Creed) to address to those who experience life as bondage to demonic powers. Nor does he have a gospel of acceptance for those who feel themselves alienated from God or for those who avoid God because they are ashamed in his presence. Kennedy's gospel offers salvation for those who feel they might not qualify for salvation if they died tonight and for those who hope to qualify on the basis of their good works.

Similarly, repentance and faith are also quite limited in the Kennedy program. Indeed, I seriously question whether Kennedy's method calls for any repentance except for a change in intellectual understanding. And although Kennedy recognizes and uses Luther's assertion that faith is "trust," he does not understand this trust as a personal relationship to God worked by God. Rather faith is seen as our decision or act of commitment:

Would you like to transfer your trust, that is,

your hope of getting into heaven, **from your church attendance, your living according to the Golden Rule**, from yourself and what you have been doing, to what Christ has done for you?

Eternal life is a gift. But faith is what I do to receive this gift. And good works are the way in which I express my gratitude for this gift! "The reason for living a godly life is gratitude" (p. 51).

Kennedy's brief statements of Christian doctrine contain many valid assertions of the gospel (pp. 33-51 and 66-76). However his emphasis on faith—even as trust—as man's work and statements such as the following detract from the clarity of the gospel:

Let me say one other thing. I'll say it very plainly. When Christ comes into a life as Saviour He comes to do something for you: to forgive you and give you eternal life. But also He comes as Lord. He comes as Master and King. He comes to demand something of you. He says there is a throne room in your heart and that throne is rightly His. He made you. He redeemed you. He bought you. He says that He wants to take His rightful place on the throne of your life. Are you willing to yield your life, to surrender your life, to Him, out of gratitude for the gift of eternal life? (p. 53)

On pp. 85-86, Kennedy lists seven "Motives for Becoming a Christian," which promise the prospect a wide variety of benefits both in this life and in the life to come. The combination and variety of the list are quite striking. Some of these motives express the "temporal faith" which Kennedy elsewhere rejects as inadequate. Some of them promise what God does not—as Kennedy clearly indicates in the "sometimes" which limits the friendship of Christ in the fourth item: "Christ is Himself a Friend to lean upon in trouble—sometimes."

Kennedy's approach is thus "evangelical" in the best sense of American Protestantism. As such it is better than much of the theology that is operative in the church. Frequently it is identical with the operative theology of Lutheran congregations. But there are sudden lapses, inappropriate statements which make faith a good work and introduce statements that are not theologically consistent with statements made elsewhere. This too is typical of direct selling. Since the emphasis is on the method and not the product, any available argument is quite useable.

The Kennedy program thus presents an unusually detailed program of personal evangelism based upon a creative combination of salesmanship and Protestant evangelical theology. In that tradition, it represents a new emphasis on personal evangelism in contrast to the mass rallies developed by Billy Sunday and Billy Graham. Like Graham, it gives some attention to the convert's relationship to the congregation in which he will be nurtured and grow. Like Graham, it will probably be more

successful in producing decisions than in integrating people into congregational life.

I have in this review attempted to focus on some of the potential strengths and weaknesses of the Kennedy program. Lutherans who adopt this program will want to make revisions in its theology in order to compensate for its weaknesses. Even minimal revisions will require basic changes both in Kennedy's method and in his theology. A broader perspective on the gospel will detract from the simplicity of the "pitch" and probably lessen the probability of an immediate positive response from the prospect. Both results will eliminate attractive features of the present program.

Lutherans may thus find it necessary to reconstruct or to reject the Kennedy program. If so, we ought to spell out our own programs as carefully and specifically as he has his. And Lutheran theology and traditions of pastoral care provide us with the resources to meet that challenge. I, for example, would want to speak of evangelism in the context of pastoral care. Evangelism is not one activity among others but is the common element of all pastoral work both of the pastor and of the congregation. Conversion is not a once-for-all but a life-long process: we are not Christians, we are becoming Christians. Thus we never cease being subjects of the church's proclamation of the gospel. That proclamation is not initiated by "Are you saved?" or "Will you go to heaven?" kinds of questions asked by teams in carefully constructed situations, but rather depends on carefully listening to what people say to us about themselves and the meaning of their lives. Only after hearing and understanding what a man says to us about himself can we choose to respond with the law or with the gospel. And we can select the specific illustration of the gospel only after we have taken a man's personal situation into account.

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Such a flexible response that takes the distinction between law and gospel seriously requires people who can recognize the various manifestations of pride, unbelief, and despair, people who are acquainted with the variety of response inherent in the gospel: the specific applications of the broad categories of redemption, reconciliation, acceptance, forgiveness, and conformity to Christ. Such flexibility in distinguishing and using the law and the gospel cannot be taught in theory. Pastors and people alike need to experience it in the pastoral care which they receive and the sermons they hear. They also need supervised — "episcopal" in the true sense — training in actually responding to people. Given this training the whole apparatus of organized teams and of carefully constructed calls which create the situation

A Lutheran reconstruction or revision of the Kennedy program would want to take into account that evangelism is a common element in all pastoral work, that the distinction between law and gospel calls also for listening to people, and that pressing for a "decision" may militate against letting the word of God grow like a seed.

in which the "method" works are no longer needed. Our people will be able to respond with God's word in a variety of situations that arise in the routines of daily life. And because it is the word of God rather than the method that is at work, there is no need to press to close the deal, no need to pressure for a decision. On the contrary, we can wait patiently while the word does its work and the gospel grows in secret. We may occasionally cultivate and water, but the life-giving power is in the seed of the gospel. And the gospel does not

explode like a bomb but grows like a mustard seed.

Given this approach to evangelism, Christians are trained to be evangelists as they are nurtured and grow in the life of the congregation. Here too, they are supported and motivated in sharing with others the gospel they have found meaningful in their own lives. Here too, new Christians are carefully nourished and supported as they grow into the maturity of the children of God. Christians whose deepest needs have been heard by the pastor and other Christians will be able to hear others. And Christians who have heard the gospel will be able to speak it.

The limitations of space do not permit more detailed suggestions on a Lutheran alternative to the Kennedy program. However, pastors and congregations will find it useful to spell out the details of their own response to our commission to "Preach the gospel to every creature." Those who do, have no need to fear comparison with the Kennedy program. □