The SBJT Forum: Neglected Matters in Evangelism

Editor’s Note: Readers should be aware of the forum’s format. D. A. Carson, Al Jackson, Ajith Fernando, Robert Coleman, and John Mark Terry 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: Granted that there are spurious conversions in the Bible, what criteria help us to discern that a profession of faith is genuine?

D. A. Carson: Many complex questions occupy the attention of the thoughtful evangelist, but this is surely one of the most complex.

The reason why it is an important question is bound up with the many passages in the Bible that depict spurious conversions. For instance, in the parable of the sower (better called, perhaps, the parable of the soils), Jesus says that some people, “like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy” (Mark 4:16), but that as soon as trouble comes they quickly fall away, for they have no root. In the Palestine of Jesus’ day, “rocky places” referred to a setting where there was a thin layer of topsoil over limestone bedrock. Because the topsoil was so shallow, it warmed up the fastest in the spring, and the seed embedded there germinated most quickly. Outside the metaphorical world, sometimes the very people who seem to be the most promising of a crop of converts turn out to have no root, and when the first whiff of trouble shows up, they wither away. But who could tell at first which plants would endure, and which would not?

Or consider the series of people depicted in Luke 9:57-62. Three different people offer to follow Jesus, or promise to do so on some condition or other. In every case, Jesus gently repulses them. One says, “I will follow you wherever you go,” but Jesus promptly erects a barrier: “Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.” I suppose the question we must ask ourselves is this: When was the last time that we repulsed someone who promised to follow Jesus, erecting barriers or high hurdles for their religious aspirations?

Or again, John speaks of “many people” who saw the signs Jesus was doing and who “believed in his name” (John 2:23). But Jesus recognized that their faith was spurious, and would not entrust himself to them. What was it about them that made their faith spurious?
Of course, we must recognize that even the most discerning of us will sometimes make mistakes. Those of us who have been in the ministry for a few years (let alone for several decades) can remember people we have baptized whose professions of faith soon proved to be ephemeral. But unless we perceive the danger, we will actually foster spurious conversions. And this will have the further effect of engendering cynicism about conversion, or a false sense of security in those who have been through the system without really being regenerated. So the question returns: Granted that there are spurious conversions in the Bible, what criteria help us to determine whether a profession of faith is genuine?

I have space to mention two criteria, and then to offer some reflections on their practical outworking in evangelistic ministry in today’s world.

The first criterion is remarkably penetrating, but does not yield quick results. It is the criterion of perseverance. Jesus told some who “believed” him, “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples” (John 8:31). The apostle Paul writes to the Colossians to tell them that God has reconciled them to himself by Christ’s physical body through death, to present them holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation, “if you continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel” (Col 1:23). The writer to the Hebrews affirms, “We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first” (Heb 3:14). Conversely, when some fail this test of perseverance, their very falling away may testify that “they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us” (1 John 2:19). This criterion of perseverance, then, is powerful. But it is not an instant panacea, a tool that provides instant discernment. In the very nature of the case, perseverance takes time to disclose itself.

The second criterion emerges from the sheer diversity and creativity of Jesus’ handling of people. One person he may command to sell all that he has, and give the proceeds to the poor; another he may instruct on who his neighbor is; to another he may tell of the visit of a Pharisee and of a publican to the temple, so as to show the nature of true contrition and faith, and to make clear who is truly justified; yet another is told that unless he forgives his brother, he cannot be forgiven himself. What is common to all these accounts, and a dozen more, is Jesus’ unerring ability to get to the heart of what stops a particular individual from closing with Christ. The point is that genuine faith embraces genuine repentance, and the barriers to repentance vary greatly from person to person. For one person it is materialism; for another, it is the instinct of self-promotion and self-preservation that would rather argue about who the neighbor is than give help to him or receive help from him; for another, it is the religious arrogance that deludes itself into thinking that religious observance makes one fit for the kingdom of heaven; for another, it is the nurtured bitterness that finds it impossible to forgive. In every case, the proper Christian confession is “Jesus is Lord.” The particular sins that defy his lordship, however, vary from person to person. For this reason, the Lord Jesus himself is so amazingly flexible and penetrating in his dealings with people. He sees through them, discerns where their true idols lie, and
focuses on the particular sins that are so binding and crippling to each individual. He may not say, “Go, call your husband and come back” (John 4:16) to the rich young ruler or to Mary Magdalene, but it was exactly what the Samaritan woman needed to hear.

These two criteria, then, the criterion of perseverance and what might be called the criterion of discerning the chief idol, are among the principal helps to evangelists seeking to discern whether or not a profession of faith is genuine.

Although these are certainly not the only criteria, it is worth thinking through how even these two may be of strategic help. That serious help is needed may be demonstrated by many things, but nothing is more potent than one particular pair of statistics. After George Whitefield had preached to great crowds in New England two hundred and fifty years ago, a careful check was made, ten years later, of those who had made profession of faith at some of his meetings, and it was found that about 85% were still following Christ faithfully. In other words, this report represents perseverance at a reasonably high order. By contrast, today’s household names in evangelism usually report that, even according to their own figures, no more than 5% of those who make first-time professions of faith are found in faithful obedience a mere five years later. Something, surely, has gone wrong, when maintaining the high numbers of ostensible “converts” is more important than obtaining a more accurate discernment of who is genuinely converted.

That brings me to my final reflection. Those who have evangelized in many different cultural settings sooner or later discover that the barriers to genuine faith differ considerably from culture to culture.

(1) A thoughtful Hindu who trusts Christ finds it very difficult to avoid the syncretism that marks so much Hindu thought. The same Hindu who “accepts Christ” one day and verbally recognizes Jesus alone as Lord may be seen going into a temple devoted to Krishna two weeks later. When challenged, that person will probably say, without any self-conscious embarrassment, “Well, I’m about 60% Christian and 40% Hindu” (or some other division of the percentages). What is very often at stake in genuine conversion of a Hindu is a change in his or her operating story-line: that Hindu must not only accept certain things about Jesus, simply adding Jesus to the Hindu pantheon. Instead he or she must see that over against the inherited Hindu pantheon is set a different story, a true story, of one God, the Creator who made all things such that they are different than he is, of sin that is bound up with rebellion against this God, of God’s actions of judgment and redemption reported through the Bible, and so forth. For this is the only “story-line” in which the significance of Jesus makes Christian sense. (Incidentally, that is why Paul’s approach to evangelizing biblical illiterates in Athens [Acts 17:16-34] is so different from his approach to evangelizing Jews and Gentiles who are intimately familiar with what the Bible says [Acts 13:13-52]. Paul’s apostolic insight and flexibility were a reflection of his Lord’s insight and flexibility.)

(2) To bring a devout and knowledgeable Roman Catholic to an evangelical grasp of the gospel demands a rather different emphasis. In this case there is a shared grasp of many of the facts of the Bible (though some of them may be interpreted differently), and a fair bit of shared theology (e.g., one God, Trinitarianism,
creation, the fall, the deity of Christ, and much more). The differences can be summed up by the three “solas” of the Reformation: salvation is by grace alone, it is received through faith alone, and the revelatory authority base that defines this faith is Scripture alone. Often one is not certain that a Roman Catholic has come to enduring evangelical faith unless those touchstones, however cast, are absorbed and appreciated.

(3) Nowadays in evangelizing university students who are postmodern relativists, the criterion for genuine faith is a little different. Just because a student says something like the following does not necessarily mean that he or she has become a Christian: “Yes, I see that Jesus is God and man, that he came into the world and died on the cross to pay for my sin. I do believe that he rose from the dead the third day. By his grace I have turned from my sin and trusted him as my Savior and Lord.” Why not? Because in postmodern epistemology, all these utterances might well be part of a larger, experiential “try it and see” approach that does not last very long. It might well be embedded in a broader outlook that is essentially pluralistic. Thus the student may be saying, in effect, “I believe all these things to be true, as I join this interesting religious community. Of course, I reserve the right to try other religious communities. After all, they all have their own insight and truth too, and who am I to say that they are mistaken?” A suitable criterion, therefore, may be an additional confession: “And I believe that there is no other way by which a human being may be reconciled to God.” For a postmodern relativist, that marks a decisive shift.

By arguing this way, am I surreptitiously adding to the gospel? No, of course not. I am merely unpacking elements that inhere in the biblical gospel. To return to the two criteria by which I began: I am insisting that genuine commitment to Christ perseveres, and that the gospel, genuinely appropriated, always overturns the cherished idol to which any person clings, whether that idol is the worldview of Hinduism, the inherited salvation-structures of Roman Catholicism, or the pluralistic outlook of much post-modernism.

So one important question we must raise whenever we engage in thoughtful evangelism on our own turf is this: Granted that there are spurious conversions in the Bible, what criteria will help me, on my particular patch, to discern that a profession of faith is genuine? How will reflection on such matters improve my presentation of the gospel here, on my particular patch? For instance, if you serve in a traditional SBC church located in the Bible belt, what inducements, social pressures, and traditions actually foster spurious conversions in that environment, and need, therefore, to be confronted in faithful gospel witness and preaching?