

Spencer, Ichabod. *A Pastor's Sketches*, Vestavia Hills, AL, Solid Ground Christian Books, 2002, 285 pp. \$12.95

PRINCIPLES OF SPENCER'S APPROACH TO EVANGELISM

Ichabod Spencer was a passionate pastor whose life and ministry filled the first half of the nineteenth century. For those unfamiliar with the author, Theodore Cuyler is quoted on the book's cover, referring to Spencer as the "Bunyan of Brooklyn," accrediting his success to the fact that he "always aimed to cooperate with the Holy Spirit." Notwithstanding the aforementioned comparison to Bunyan, this reader offers a different comparative analysis to describe Spencer's philosophy on evangelism. Ichabod's heart and passion are aptly depicted by imagining the hybrid evangelist that would result from crossing Richard Baxter with Charles Spurgeon. Spencer both epitomizes and embraces the strengths of Baxter's commitment to pastoral care in evangelizing, while simultaneously championing Spurgeon's soul-winner mentality in every aspect of daily living.

In fairness to Spencer, his work and legacy are worthy of their own comparison. Most people, if not all, familiar with his ministry would agree the name Ichabod Spencer need not stand in the shadow of any other pillar of the faith. Consequently, this review will endeavor to highlight and explain the under girding principles of the author's perspective on evangelism. *A Pastor's Sketches* will serve as a guide because it was written by Spencer to offer a comprehensive overview of his philosophy in application.

There are seven principles that envelop the author's philosophy of evangelism. The first is: *faith is the centerpiece of evangelism*. Faith, in this context, is like a coin with two sides. The first aspect of faith relates to the evangelist. Those who would carry the gospel message forward effectively need first to personally embrace its requirement of faith in Jesus Christ. The other side of the coin relates to the targeted unbeliever and

their understanding that faith in Jesus Christ as the Son of God and Redeemer of our sins is the one and only standard for salvation. However, faith is also multifaceted in the context of evangelizing. For example, the message must be sent that complete faith is required in the sanctification process. On the other hand, it is equally imperative to communicate that a child-like, simple faith is what God wants. Too often we overcomplicate or misdirect the role of faith when sharing the gospel message. Spencer speaks of faith in evangelism much like an architect describes the foundation of a structure. The author quoted and endorsed a new convert's definition of faith: "I have taken Him at his word." (p.57) Spencer would have both Christians and unbelievers alike, as a first step, simply take God at his word.

Spencer's second philosophical principle of evangelism is rooted in the role and responsibility of the Holy Spirit in the process. Put simply, *no one can come to God without the Holy Spirit first drawing them*. Moreover, it is equally important to both remember and communicate that God does not withhold the Holy Spirit from anyone who asks for His indwelling. In this context, Spencer helps his readers see the relationship between the Holy Spirit, witnessing Christian, and the unbeliever. The Spirit starts the evangelistic process by quickening the heart of the obedient Christian. Some hear God's call to evangelize the lost through the compelling passages in Scripture calling every Christian to the great commission. Others hear the Holy Spirit whispering to their conscience, directing them to initiate contact with a particular individual or group of people. In either case, like a tool in the hands of a master craftsman, the witnessing believer is an important component of the work, but never the controlling element. At the same time, the Holy Spirit also quickens the heart of the unbeliever prior to all harvest encounters. It has been said that every conversion experience is a Spirit-driven exchange between obedient believers and Holy Spirit-prepared hearts. In the relationship between the unbeliever and the Holy Spirit, Spencer also drives the point home that no

soul is carried away by the Spirit of God. Each individual must choose to follow Christ and accept the gospel message for themselves. As the author puts it, “A sinner must choose, or he must be lost.” (p.205) Nothing removes this duty from the unbeliever. Moreover, Spencer goes on to say that if the lost person refuses to accept Christ, the Spirit will depart from him.

The third principle highlighted is: *biblically sound evangelism is action-oriented*. Spencer addresses this issue from multiple perspectives in the text. The bottom line is that there are multitudes in our churches waiting for God to shout out directions that can be converted into personal convictions. The faulty premise of this lazy faction of half-hearted Christians is that God needs to give them a personal admonishment, above and beyond the command to all professing Christians, to obey the great commission. Spencer reminds his audience, “They must work, if they would have God work in them. There can be no religion without obedience.” (p.77) The implication of the enclosed quote is that the Lord has already given the directives; thus, waiting for more instruction is not a valid option. The only question for those waiting for conviction is whether or not they are going to obey the Word of God and purposely, proactively participate in evangelism. Many reprobate by-standers use the excuse of not having enough time to share their faith. Spencer rejects all such claims and points to the root of said aversions, properly pinning their excuses on one’s lack of empathetic heart, as opposed to simple time constraints. Lest anyone should doubt his diagnosis, Ichabod reminds his readers that we have lost people all around us. Christian churches abound amidst a sea of lost sinners. Yet, many lost souls have never been approached by a loving believer who is willing to share the gospel, give them a Bible, pray for them and/or invite them to church.

Spencer’s next principle is: *accurate instruction is critical*. This is yet another issue with multiple facets. The first component addresses what the witnessing believer is to share with their lost acquaintances. The author answers the implied question

succinctly, “the directions of God’s Word are the only directions for inquiring sinners... truth is the Spirit’s instrumentality.” (p.86) The only place one can be assured to find perfectly accurate instruction for salvation and sanctified living is the Bible. Interpretations, opinions, and well-intentioned, extra-biblical works can all be valuable, but should never be substituted for the source they intend to reflect. In a related context, Spencer also points out that too much religious talk can dull the effects of Scripture. We need to recognize that “no man can preach so powerfully as the Holy Spirit. It is vastly important to know when to stop.” (p.83) Another aspect of the same principle, connected to the theme of appropriate caution, speaks to the risks associated with fanaticism and spiritual pride. Emotionalism outside the boundaries of orthodox theology leads to dangerous, counter-productive fanaticism. A relationship with Christ is built on truth not feelings. In terms of pride, Spencer suggests “Spiritual pride is the worst of all pride, if it is not the worst snare of the devil.”(p.173) The last piece of the accurate-instruction principle was covered by the author when he challenged all believers to ensure new converts fully understand the basic propositions of the “doctrines of human sinfulness, divine sovereignty, atonement, justification by faith in Jesus Christ, regeneration by the special power of the Holy Spirit, and the constant need of divine aid... Heaven has but one mold.”(p.130)

The fifth principle of Spencer’s philosophy of evangelism is short and sweet: *there is power in prayer*. Ichabod admonished his readers and all to whom he ministered; never underestimate the power of prayer. Moreover, prayer should be the first step in every believers attempt to reach the lost. We should ask God to prepare the hearts of those we meet, while simultaneously giving us the wisdom and sensitivity to speak as the Holy Spirit would guide us. The crux of Spencer’s message regarding the power of prayer is that God’s servants are to pray expecting God to respond – *there is power in prayer*.

Spencer's next philosophical principle is: *biblically sound evangelism is hard work*. At the center of his declaration, the author makes it clear for all listening; the Christian life in general is not easy. Ichabod wanted every potential witnessing believer and all converts to understand that the genuine Christian life is one marked by self-denial. Building on that premise, Spencer challenged people to be totally sold out for God in their commitment to evangelism. He pointed to the subtle but significant differences between talking about God versus sharing God with lost people, and accepting people's interest in God versus their genuine repentance as a satisfactory response to the Gospel message. One path is easy to walk while playing church but the other requires serious discernment and hard work on behalf of the kingdom. Spencer advocates the wooing of souls through the application of love, but never endorses any lowering of biblical standards in so doing.

The last of Spencer's principles speaks to: *maintaining a finish-line perspective*. He offers two valuable slants on the issue, one from the unbeliever's *realistic* point of view and the other from a Christian's vantage point. The gist of his message pertaining to the unsaved is encapsulated in the old war-time cliché, there are no atheists in foxholes. Ichabod shared from his personal experiences with dying unbelievers. He saw first hand the emptiness and fear that plagued the last days and hours of lost souls. Painting a realistic picture of the unbeliever's and the Christian's grand finale on earth, their finish-line, was a very powerful conversion strategy. In contrast to the bleak, closing hours of a sinner's despair, Spencer told his hearers "I have always felt that a Christian ought to die rejoicing. In dying, we are going home to our Savior." (p.285) Through an apologetic explanation of the differences between the two finish-lines, the author was able to evangelize many forward thinking lost souls.

Strengths and Weaknesses of Spencer's Approach

The overarching strength of Spencer's approach to evangelism is its biblically sound, comprehensive nature. There are eight specific examples within the text that serve as pillars, each built upon the foundation of Spencer's principles. The first noteworthy attribute is the willingness to administer tough love with a tender-hearted sensitivity. There are times when discouragement and dismay are useful tools in converting sinners. If a believer helps a lost soul feel better by downplaying the perils of hell, they have actually hurt the person. Spencer always recommended sharing the truth of the Bible in a loving fashion, while never watering it down. Ichabod said: "blind guides do mischief."(p.80) Many converted sinners look back upon their conversion experience with particular gratitude for those who held the line with them. Spencer shared the words of one thankful Christian who applauded the standard bearer by saying, "You opened my eyes. You told me just the truth."(p.106)

Another strength of Spencer's approach relates to what he called an "ignorance of self" in the title of the book's sixteenth chapter. In essence, by analogy, he explains that a mentally delusional patient cannot effectively serve as his own psychiatrist. His words speak directly to those unbelievers satisfied with their own status quo. "Convicted sinners are very poor judges of what will do them good. The very things they think they need are often the very things which are snares to their souls."(p.124)

Spencer's blueprint for evangelism is also to be commended for its sensitivity to the Holy Spirit's direction. His use of word-pictures to make a point is a peripheral, but no less noteworthy aspect of the ministry. In this case, Ichabod described his adherence to the Spirit's leading like an "arrow driven deeper." When evangelizing, if it appears one issue has impressed or intrigued the listener, camp on it. The believer should always be sensitive to look for and follow the Spirit's lead. "I just aim to conspire with the Holy Spirit."(p.153)

An ancient Chinese proverb warns against chasing two rabbits; the inevitable outcome is the capture of neither. Spencer applied this principle to his evangelistic efforts and ultimately proved its merit through the fruits of his ministry. “A divided mind has poor prospects before it.”(p.155) Spencer transformed this concept into application by forcing an uncompromising litmus test for all ministerial endeavors. He challenged people to ask whether or not what they were doing was the *best* thing they could be doing to evangelize the lost. He never doubted people had the ability to do more than one thing at a time, nor did he question whether or not something was generically good. He measured every situation against its potential. He put forth the uncomfortable truth that there are times when “the good” becomes the enemy of “the best.” In-so-doing, Ichabod Spencer captured one of the core characteristics of genuine leadership.

Twenty-four hour a day service is becoming a staple in the economic infrastructure of western civilization. In much the same way, Spencer wanted people to know that the rituals, facilities, and liturgical requirements so often espoused in those days were not necessary. He taught and shared a God who was available twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. He wanted people to know that “sinners may seek God and find Him at any time.”(p.201) Moreover, no middle man is needed between a seeking soul and their living God. Spencer’s closing point on the subject was indirectly related but critically important. As believers, we are to lead people to condemn themselves without ever condemning them ourselves. Obedient servants are to relish the opportunity to be used in evangelism, regardless of the convert’s past or present condition.

Another strength of Spencer’s approach is his straight-forward understanding and explanation of the salvation process. He is very practical in his teaching which is directly linked to his effectiveness and receptivity levels amongst unbelievers. According to Ichabod’s classical methodology, there are two stages involved in dedicating one’s life

to Christ. First, every individual is called to submit his or her life to the Lord. The second step is the development of genuine faith. Faith empowers the “unconditional” component of complete dedication. Unconditional faith in turn unleashes God’s full blessing. When we give our complete personhood over to God and stop trying to save ourselves, Jesus steps in to take care of us. “Affection, like faith, is seldom metaphysical. Its depth lies in its simplicity.”(p.224)

One of Spencer’s core convictions is linked to the application of contextualization in ministry. In the latter part of his book, Ichabod goes to great lengths to point out children and adults typically have different spiritual needs and receptive concerns. While he elaborates on the issue of children needing more facts in evangelism, (having enough feelings already) and American adults typically needing to be led to feel more (assuming most have the knowledge necessary to be saved), what he is saying in application is that one size *does not* fit all in evangelism. Spencer’s awareness of the differences inherent to every witnessing experience undoubtedly played a significant role in his evangelistic effectiveness. He knew the importance and preached the necessity of contextualizing the gospel message each and every time it was shared.

For all of Spencer’s strengths, there was only one weakness found in his approach to evangelism. At the onset, in fairness to the author, it should be noted that the weakness is more of a potential problem than a consistent shortcoming. Nonetheless, the one Achilles heel of Ichabod Spencer’s evangelistic philosophy is his propensity to over evaluate the hearts of the converted – new and old alike. There were many examples in the text of Ichabod making authoritative, objective declarations regarding the authenticity of another person’s salvation based on his own observations. For example, Spencer said: “a truly regenerate man cannot have any doubt of the entire depravity of the heart.” (p.127) It is this reader’s opinion that Spencer had a tendency to become over zealous and misguided in the evaluation of another’s conversion experience. It is important to

remember only God knows whether a man is truly saved – He alone is judge. While we are to recognize believers by their fruit, we are not called to squeeze, poke, sniff, and thump every potential fruit to the point of damaging it in the evaluation process. It is a fine line between loving accountability and legalistic, litmus testing of developing believers.

My Personal Philosophy of Evangelism

My personal philosophy of evangelism has largely been shaped by a fundamental understanding of the great commission's command to all Christians, the call to arms issued by both Richard Baxter in *The Reformed Pastor* and Charles Spurgeon in *The Soul Winner*, direct and reflective enlightenment from sound seminary training, the examples set by mature Christians in my life, and now Ichabod Spencer's insights and sketches from applied evangelism. I have embraced what I think are the common threads of each contributor, while also adopting some of the stylistic components from my tutors. With glory and credit given to God, and appreciation expressed to all who have helped me in my journey of faith, I offer the following synopsis as "my" philosophy of evangelism, all the while acknowledging that I am working with borrowed capital.

My philosophy is built upon the foundation of God the creator. My conviction is rooted in the fact that God is distinct from creation. He is sovereign and holy, requiring obedience to his commands. I also understand Him to be a God that goes after the lost. The protoevangelium of Genesis 3:15 sets the stage for the entire redemptive and atoning message of the Bible. The next cornerstone of my approach establishes the fact that sin separates us from the creator God. Only in understanding this point can one make sense of the need for evangelism. At the same time, Romans 3:23 tells us this is a problem every human being must address. Next, I acknowledge and share that God has a redemptive plan for the atonement of each person's sin-debt, through the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. In essence, we have a pre-paid ticket to heaven, but no

one can claim their ticket without first repenting of their sins and putting their faith in Jesus as their risen Savior. Both repentance and faith require an intellectual, emotional, and volitional surrender to God – and only the Holy Spirit can truly judge someone’s level of commitment.

Having explained the biblical basis and pragmatic mechanics under girding my philosophy and theology of evangelism, the next step is to address the universal responsibilities every Christian is called to embrace. Every believer is commanded by Jesus to actively participate in biblical Church growth through evangelism. Jesus’ great commission, described repeatedly in Matthew 28:18-20, Mark 16:15, Luke 24: 47-48, John 20:21, and Acts 1:8, make it clear that evangelizing and making disciples is not an option for obedient Christians, it is God’s command.

In closing, I will briefly summarize some of the core principles I embrace in the active component of evangelism. First and foremost, I believe it is the number one responsibility of every believer to win souls to Jesus Christ. Next, it is critical to remember and embrace the fact that nothing happens in evangelism without the Holy Spirit’s involvement. The best way to ensure one’s proper perspective and healthy approach, regardless of our circumstances, is to always emulate Christ, using Jesus as our model. At the same time, I remind myself that prayer, faith, and means are woven into the cord of effective evangelism. Each strand is essential but all are strengthened when applied together. Next, my personality aligns well with the principle of contextualizing evangelism. As an ex-marketer, I am sensitive to the need-for and impact generated from effective contextualization. Lastly, I am an old-school proponent of leading by example. Far more workers would join in the harvest if they heard their leaders cry out “follow me,” as opposed to hearing academic descriptions of what *they* “ought to be doing.” Evangelism is for everyone, especially the Christian leader!