

The Biblical Truth of Rejection in Evangelism and Failure in Discipleship

I would guess that most Orthodox Christians that I know can tell you that there is at least something wrong with how preachers like Joel Osteen present the Bible.

There may be a range of opinions on how heretical he is or isn't but most would have the wisdom to realize that there isn't much if any content on God's judgment or suffering. And not that I think just anyone can avoid these topics and still build a huge church, I have no doubt that people often have ears that want to hear only good news. And in spite of the success of what can accurately be labeled a "health, wealth and prosperity Gospel," most true Christians I know see through the facade.

Yet I submit that even within genuine Christianity, where pastors and preachers deal with divine judgment, suffering and a whole host of other unpleasant topics in the counsel of God, there are topics we too often avoid.

One of them (or in reality two that are closely linked) is the rejection the church should often face when preaching Jesus, either immediately or eventually.

This is not a rare theology in our Bible. Jesus himself said the way to Heaven is narrow and the way to Hell is broad. Isaiah defined Christ as "despised and rejected by men". And there is even a story in John 6 where Jesus preached a hard truth about how dedicated his followers had to be to him and John records that, "From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him."

Reality bears this out. As recently as 2015, Pew had 31% of

the world claiming Christianity[1.www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/04/05/christians-remain-worlds-largest-religious-group-but-they-are-declining-in-europe]. And seeing as how undoubtedly that number includes cults, those who believe in works salvation and those who merely attend church without any real life transformation from the Gospel, we can be assured that far less than 31% of the world is following Jesus. Jesus testified this by saying that many who claim him are not his followers (Matthew 7:21-23), It is for this reason that I use qualifiers like “true,” “genuine” and “orthodox” when describing actual disciples of Jesus Christ.

Another thing that makes the number of true Christians hard to know is that one of Jesus’s parables states that there are four responses to the Gospel. One is flat out rejection. The last is acceptance and a fruitful life. But the middle two present more nuance and more difficulties in the topic of evangelism and discipleship. Without getting too sidetracked by the interpretation of the middle two types of seed, I think it is fair to say that there are many people who accept the message of Christ for a short time but do not finish. The fact that neither of the middle two groups is fruitful leads me to believe they are not genuinely saved.

This coincides with several verses that teach, or least strongly imply, that a person is not saved until they have lived faithfully until the end of their life. Consider:

You will be hated by everyone because of me, but the one who stands firm to the end will be saved (Matthew 10:22).

Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold, but the one who stands firm to the end will be saved (Matthew 24:13).

Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life (Revelation 2:10).

For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end (Hebrews 3:14).

If we endure, we will also reign with him (1 Timothy 2:12).

It also not my intention to turn this article into an Arminianism vs. Calvinism debate but it is hard for me to miss the truth of what Jesus, Paul, the author of Hebrews and John all seem to agree on. This also supports the translation of present continuous in some verbs of belief, as Picirilli explains about John 3:16 and 3:36, etc. The whoever "is believing" is saved. Because the person can cease to believe at some point. The parable of the sower seems to confirm this.

But more than an area of theology this troubles me in practice. I suppose it is easy for me to say this as a pastor of a non-mega church, but I experience rejection in evangelism and failure in discipleship all the time. I've talked, witnessed and preached to countless people who never made a decision for Christ. And beyond this, there are two facts keeping me up at night from my 16-year ministry in Chicago: probably 90% of the teenagers that were being disciplined when I was the youth pastor of my church are not actively being disciplined today and the majority of people I've baptized (adults and teenagers alike) are not actively being disciplined in a church today.

I have zero doubt that some of this is on me. I have faults and I have ignorance in the areas of witnessing and making disciples. But the Bible verses mentioned above make me realize that some of it is just the reality of how people respond to God, and not to me. Part of my goal in writing this is to get it out there for people who may feel similar. I would imagine just about every Christian who values evangelism and discipleship (which should be every Christian) gets this to some level. Even the megachurch workers and those who share

the Gospel with hundreds of people each year. It just seems to me the books and blog posts and sermons and resources on these topics, even in conservative Christianity, focus primarily on success. Here is what to do to be successful. Failure or rejection may be acknowledged, but often only in passing. I feel that the New Testament gives it a thorough treatment.

Quite often in my life, because I'm sure God directs it this way so that he gets the glory, I feel like my experience and knowledge are so flimsy. I mean that sincerely, even as someone who writes for a website. So when I feel like I don't know enough from my experiences to write to help people, all I know to do is interpret the Bible. That is how it should be regardless, but often it isn't. So today, after years of frustration and failure in the two pillars of how the message of Jesus Christ impacts the world—evangelism and discipleship—I only offer a theology that is far more important than my experience.

If you feel the same or if you feel completely different, we welcome feedback below.

Five Theological Sounding Words Christians Should Know and Use

In the 15 years of being a pastor and preacher in Chicago, I don't think I have ever one time used the word "Justification" in a sermon. Or "Sanctification". I believe the concepts they entail are necessary to teach but I have always felt that they

could be heavy to my audience and I am comfortable explaining them with other words.

That is not the case with all of the “Christian-ese” the American church has. There are some words I do not want to erase from my vocabulary in an effort to make the Bible easier to understand. I believe there are some words that have no good synonyms and are so rich in meaning that the church does well to learn and use them. Because you can’t find anything equivalent in secular vocabulary. Christianity has concepts and truths unequaled and unparalleled in the world.

As always I seek balance. I don’t want to talk completely in esoteric jargon as a Christian but neither do I want to try to be so hip with my lingo I eliminate all theological terms entirely. And I will say up front that your list may be different than mine. I am not claiming this is the “correct” list on this topic. With that said, here are five I use:

1. Covenant

I have written before that [I do not mind using the phrase](#) “Christianity isn’t a religion; it’s a relationship.” Yet the word “relationship” can be woefully inadequate when describing the relationship our God wants us to have with Him in Jesus Christ. I have a relationship with my uncle. But I don’t have a *covenant* relationship.

For millennia, through men like Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David, God has used this word to communicate how he enters into a relationship with men. And there are consistencies in all of their covenants: a promise on God’s part, a symbol or sign to confirm it and a response of a faithful commitment by the followers. It was a very serious relational pact to be entered into. It was not to be taken lightly. It was like a spiritual marriage.

Now through Jesus Christ we enter into a New Covenant, not from the blood of lambs and goats, but through his blood. And we need to grasp the level and seriousness of the commitment that covenant is. No other word in English really captures it. "Marriage" is close but it carries too much in connotation. Yet man-woman marriage is supposed to be a picture of the God-man covenant commitment.

2. Atonement

I have written about this before for REO when writing about [Leviticus for Good Friday in 2016](#). This word matters to teaching about Christian salvation and how we can enter into covenant with God. No other word (apart from the very similar "propitiation") in English carries so many layers in meaning and truth.

In general, in both Testaments, it has a threefold significance: a substitute is given in place of our sin, our sin is forgiven and God's wrath is satisfied. All three of these facts are crucial to our theology and faith. And God gave us a beautifully concise word to capture them together. We see it in Leviticus over and over, we see it change in the Gospels and we see that change explained in Romans and Hebrews. I love the Bible for how I marvel at how it is both consistent and simultaneously divided by a major transformation at the same time. Jesus is now the substitution (not animals) but God's wrath is still satisfied and my sins are still forgiven.

3. Evangelism

Phrases like "Sharing your faith" and "Witnessing" are great but the word "Evangelize" literally means to preach or proclaim the Gospel. And that is our message. I would put "Gospel" as one of the five words but it has such a deep, rich

and multi-faceted meaning it cannot be treated in a short paragraph. Yet I will mention [I still agree with REO contributor David Lytle](#) when he expands the definition of Gospel to the entirety of the content of four books we have on Jesus's life and not something as simple as "The Gospel is that Jesus died for your sins and rose again."

Regardless of what Gospel means, we are mandated to share it and we have a ready-made verb to communicate that mandate. Phrases like "Preach the Gospel" conjure up ideas of standing on a stage in front of a crowd. "Evangelism" has less baggage, in my opinion (though the word "Evangelical" may have a ton of baggage).

4. Lamenting

I suppose this is a word that we hear in English outside of church, but not very often. Yet the Bible has a form of this word as the name of one of its books, which is significant to me.

Christians should know how to lament. And the importance of it. Jeremiah is called the "weeping prophet" and Jesus was a "man of sorrows and familiar with the deepest suffering". Over 60 of the Psalms can be labeled "Lament Psalms". And in both testaments over and over God's people are commanded to weep and wail and all manner of similar verbs (Isaiah 22:12, James 4:9).

But I think there is a theological significance to the word "Lament". I believe it teaches us how to process the horror that comes from both the evil in the world and in our hearts in a God-honoring and proactive way, instead of a reactive state that similar English words convey.

5. I AM

This one is different and not just because it's two words. It's because it's not a verb or a noun like the others. It is in some way a name for God that connects Old Testament YHWH (another name Christians should know) and New Testament Jesus Christ.

The significance of Jesus saying in John 8:58 that "before Abraham was, I AM" is monumental. They started to stone him for it because his opponents knew he was claiming what YHWH claimed in Exodus 3:14-15. Outside of how fascinating it is that here Jesus claims to be outside of time and that he cannot be restricted by human logic or the grammar of any language ("before Abraham was, I AM" is linguistically nonsensical in every language I have studied), Jesus saying "I AM" communicates a claim to and self-awareness of his deity. He knew perfectly Scriptures like Exodus 3:14-15 and Isaiah 42:8 and was intentional with his words.

There are many other "I AM" statements by Jesus and perhaps my favorite is in John 18:6 when a detachment of soldiers carrying torches and weapons went to arrest Jesus. He asked them whom they were looking for and they said, "Jesus of Nazareth". And he replied "I AM". Some translations add the word "he" as in "I am he" for clarity but I think it makes the meaning less clear. For when he said this phrase, they drew back and fell to the ground. No army in the world can stand up to the LORD of Heaven's Armies. I think there is power in this name of God as stated in Exodus. And Jesus being God in the flesh and using this name, humbled these men.

Are there theology words you feel similar about?

