

Every Simple Salvation Prayer Counts!

This post is intended as a brief defense of the practice of street evangelism, and in particular, my habit of counting responses..

Since taking part in the [School of the Circuit Rider](#), I have been persuaded of the power of keeping count of the number of people who respond to the gospel when we are involved in evangelism. It's particularly helpful when on a regular basis you are going out onto the streets trying to share the simple gospel, and having to wage a constant battle against disillusionment and discouragement as you find more people closed to the message than are ready to hear it, let alone respond. Because the fact is that even though most people might be disinterested, there are **always** at least some who are open. [Matthew 9:37](#) **promises** that "the harvest is plentiful", and I am convinced that this is a truth that applies in every place and at every time — not just to first-century Galilee. The gospel is always [the power of salvation](#), and as we lift up Jesus, [people will be drawn to Him](#).

If it seems like this isn't working, then the problem isn't the gospel, nor even the hardness of the hearts of those that we're trying to reach. It's that we're called ([Matthew 9:37-38](#) tells us) to pray for more labourers. We're not just called to win the lost to Christ, we're called to mobilise the saved, and we're called to pray. I've said it before, and I've said it again: one anointed evangelist that led a thousand people to faith every night couldn't reach the whole world even in a thousand years — but if two people would both win one person to Christ and each train that person to win another person, and train them to do the same, and so on, and so on, then every year their number would double, and in less than forty years their numbers would have equalled that of the world's population.

Now, one might conclude from this that we hardly need to worry about evangelism at all—surely those figures show that it's discipleship rather than evangelism that should be our priority! But the truth is that in the kingdom very rarely does the same person share the gospel with someone, lead them to the Lord, disciple them, and continue to train them as they develop as a leader. Rather, Jesus tells his disciples, "I sent you to reap what you have not worked for. Others have done the hard work, and you have reaped the benefits of their labor" ([John 4:38](#)). If we want to see a movement take place in which new converts find themselves easily leading others to the Lord, we need to be prepared to put in our share of hard work, in prayer and apparently-fruitless sowing of the word of God.

And — to come back to our original point — it is a vital encouragement when you have embraced the call to live a lifestyle of evangelistic seed-sowing to remember that there are people responding to what you are doing. And as you repeatedly go out and share the gospel message, and a few of those

with whom you share consistently respond in faith or at least interest or openness, then the number of those who have responded will grow! I at least find this very encouraging.

However, it is true (I have found!) that some dislike this practice of counting the number of responses. There are a number of objections that I have encountered, and I will now try to respond to them.

Objection #1. Counting the number of ‘salvation prayers’ devalues the other parts of the process.

I have to admit that this has sometimes been an unintended side-effect of my energetic persistence in rejoicing in the number of responses where people respond to the gospel and pray a simple prayer receiving the gift of salvation through Jesus.

Our friend [Abigail has written eloquently on her blog](#) to this effect—about how a simplistic celebration of someone turning to Christ “misses out all the doubt, waiting, patience, confusion, praying, and more doubt”, and can cause a Christian to start “comparing myself to other Christians, and feeling truly rubbish”. (And let me take this opportunity to say briefly how amazing Abigail is: she was one of the first people we met when we moved into Arbury (that’s North Cambridge, for those of you reading who aren’t from ‘ere!), and has been part of our discipleship-group/house-church since [the beginning](#); she’s now just finished her first year of university, and spent the summer [in mission in Ukraine](#)).

Certainly there are many things that I still need to learn about how to encourage people to engage in evangelism. Maybe in our numerical record-keeping, we should record and rejoice in every single gospel conversation (or even just conversation with a stranger—particularly for those of us who struggle to start talking to new people), not just the ones that end positively. But hopefully at least as people get to know me they will see that my heart is not to convey any sort of competitive condemnation.

Objection #2. It’s about individuals — not numbers!

I absolutely agree that God loves each individual person specifically, uniquely, and infinitely. As [Jesus encouraged his disciples](#): “Are not two sparrows sold for a cent? And yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father knowing it. But in fact, your Father knows the very number of hairs on your head. So do not fear—you are more valuable than many sparrows!”

But I disagree that counting the number of responses diminishes the significance of the individuals concerned. If we look at the book of Acts it is clear that Luke is thrilled — almost obsessed! — with the numerical growth of the church: from the original count of “one hundred and twenty” (Acts 1:15), then on Pentecost “there were added about three thousand souls” (Acts 2:41), then later “the

number of the men came to be about five thousand” (Acts 4:4). One could also look at Acts 6:1, 6:7, 11:21, 14:21, 16:5, 19:26 — all these verses emphasise the growing number of responses to the gospel.

Objection #3. It’s meaningless without follow-up.

Sometimes this objection appears on its own, sometimes it is given in reaction to my response to the previous objection—‘Ah, but the numbers in Acts are referring to newly baptized church members, not just apparent responses to some simple gospel presentation’. Even when people aren’t objecting per se to the keeping track of numbers of responses to evangelism, the frequent question that appears in answer to an attempt to enthusiastically share this evidence of gospel breakthrough is something like ‘Hmm, really?—and what about the follow-up?’

And I readily concede that it is good and important to do whatever we can to help those who respond to the gospel to transition into some Christian community where they will be able to be taught and disciplined and encouraged and held accountable to continue growing as a Christian. I believe just as passionately in discipleship as I do in evangelism.

But on the other hand, I am convinced that even if there is no way for us to ever connect with someone again, we have still been commissioned to share the gospel with them. And even if the fault for failing to follow-up does lie fairly on us, then we can still trust that God is able to use whatever seed of gospel truth we succeeded in sowing when we had opportunity to do whatever he wants in that person’s life. *“God’s word will not return void!”*

In fact in the Book of Acts (specifically ch. 8:26-40) we see that God engineered a situation such that an evangelist was unable to arrange any follow-up: when Philip shared the gospel with the Ethiopian, the man responded instantly and was baptized in some water that happened to be at hand, and immediately “the Spirit of the Lord carried Philip away”.

Aside: A Parable

Still considering the question of the effectiveness of evangelism without adequate follow-up, consider this hypothetical situation:

Imagine a person who knew nothing of God, who was struggling with all sorts of serious sins, who one day encountered one of our simple evangelists as he was walking through town. ‘Hi, do you have a minute?, can we share the message of Jesus with you?’ The person is too shocked by the offer to immediately refuse to listen, and our evangelist takes advantage of the pause to begin sharing.

She explains how everything starts with the God who created everything, whose love is infinite and irresistible—but does he know that love? No? Well, that’s because all of humanity has been cut off from

God ever since the first human beings turned away from God in mistrust and unbelief. But God so loved the world that he sent Jesus to die for us, to demonstrate his love for us—and there's no greater way to show love than to lay down your life for someone! And because of his death, the penalty for our sin has been paid! We can be forgiven, we can have assurance of eternal life, we can receive the indwelling personal love of the Holy Spirit!

Our evangelist asks, 'Is there any reason why you wouldn't want to receive this gift of salvation?'

Suddenly the Holy Spirit pierces through a lifetime's apathy to spiritual things, and ignites a tiny spark of faith in the heart of our hypothetical person, and to his surprise he finds himself saying 'Er okay, do I have to do anything?'

'Well, like any gift, you have to unwrap it and receive it! May I lead you in a simple prayer right now?' And before he knows it, he's repeating a simple salvation prayer: 'Father God, I'm sorry for the wrong I've done; Thankyou that Jesus came and died to set me free; I believe—I want to receive the gift of salvation; In Jesus' name, Amen.' To his astonishment, his eyes are beginning to fill with tears — before the evangelist can tell quite what's happened, he's made a quick exit.

Now suppose that person fails to connect with any Christians who are able to encourage him to grow in his faith. He doesn't have a Bible. He continues to be trapped in various ungodly addictions. A neutral human assessment would see no convincing evidence of clear sanctification in his life. Suppose that he dies, just a year later, in a tragic car accident.

His body is buried; his spirit ascends before the judgement seat of God. The devil appears, cackling diabolically: 'I think this one's for me!'

But suddenly Jesus speaks: 'Just hold on a minute, let's do this properly!' An angel is dispatched and returns within an instant with a large book — the devil grabs it out of his hand, and opens it. He starts flicking through the pages, which reveal a series of incriminating photographs. 'See what he's like! Pornography, theft, cheating, stealing, bullying, lying, swearing, fornication, sexual abuse, rape, abortion, murder! He's mine, I tell you!'

'Hold on', Jesus repeats, and he turns to a page where there's a single photo of the man standing talking to our evangelist. Beside the photo is written a transcript of the conversation that took place. Jesus lays a finger of his nail-pierced hand next to a particular phrase, and reads it slowly. 'What? What are you saying?' the devil rants, increasingly agitated. Jesus repeats it louder, and then louder: 'Jesus came and died to set me free'. And then, so soft it's barely a whisper, in a still small voice: 'He's definitely mine'.

A mighty angel appears with another book, from which is read out: “FOR WITH THE HEART ONE BELIEVES AND IS JUSTIFIED, AND WITH THE MOUTH ONE CONFESSES AND IS SAVED”. ‘What about all this?’ screams the enraged devil, reaching for the first book, and trying to find again the condemning evidence. But now there’s nothing but blank pages. ‘Argh, where did they go?’ screams Satan. The mighty angel speaks again: “HE CANCELLED THE RECORD OF THE CHARGES AGAINST US AND TOOK IT AWAY BY NAILING IT TO THE CROSS”. The devil disappears in a cloud of fury. Jesus beckons the man towards a banqueting table where a lavish feast has been set out. Too stunned to immediately respond to the invitation, the man mutters to one of the angels, ‘Whew, that was close!’ The angel’s booming voice thunders forth again: “WHO COULD BRING A CHARGE AGAINST GOD’S CHOSEN ONES? IT IS GOD WHO JUSTIFIES. WHO IS HE WHO CONDEMNS? IT IS CHRIST WHO DIED, YES RATHER, WHO WAS RAISED FROM THE DEAD, WHO IS AT THE RIGHT HAND OF GOD, WHO ALSO MAKES INTERCESSION FOR US.”

Objection #4. How can you reliably judge whether people are sincere in their response?

I admit that this is difficult. Some would say it’s always impossible to say with certainty whether someone — certainly a new convert! — has saving faith.

But Paul writes [to the Thessalonians](#) saying, “we know, brethren loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction”. And if we believe [the Book of Acts](#), Paul was only in Thessalonica for “three Sabbath days”, so not long enough to see the long-term fruit and sanctifying evidence of the faith of the Thessalonian believers.

Strictly speaking, we try to make clear that the numbers we share are numbers of salvation-prayers prayed, rather than of guaranteed salvations. And certainly in many situations there is not the visible evidence that Paul speaks of. But on the other hand, sometimes there is! Sometimes you see the tears running down people’s cheeks, or the joy in their faces, or just the light coming on in their eyes. And I don’t want to undermine the authentic reality of assured salvation which simple faith guarantees, just for the sake of erring on the safe side in my reporting of numbers.

I speak sincerely, in the fear of the Lord, when I say that I don’t want to be guilty of exaggerating our evangelistic success. But I confess that my greater concern is that I would never fail to respond with exuberant joy whenever it seems that one who is lost has been found, one who was dead is now alive. It so strikes me that in [the parable of the Prodigal Son](#), the Father doesn’t even wait for the son to finish saying his ‘sinner’s prayer’ before leaping on him in inappropriately extravagant celebration. And I don’t want to be like the older brother, critical and self-righteous, refusing to join in the rejoicing. I want to be like the Father.