

Reverse Engineering Evangelism

Romans 10:14-21

August 26, 2018

Introduction:

Have you ever heard of “reverse engineering?” Normally an engineer works towards a goal where you need to develop and design the appropriate systems and technology to create a project. But with reverse engineering, you work backwards: you already have the finished product and instead you’re working through the steps in reverse order in order to understand it better. For example, at the end of the Second World War, three American B-29 bombers who had been flying missions over Japan were forced to make emergency landings in the USSR. Since the Soviets didn’t have any long range heavy bombers, they decided to keep the B-29 and reverse engineer them, which allowed them to create their own Tu-4 bomber a few years later.

In our passage this morning, the apostle Paul is going to “reverse engineer” the process of evangelism. He’s going to work his way backward through the process in order to help us understand the important role we play in bringing people to Christ. So we’re going to spend the first half of the message doing reverse engineering, which I think will be helpful to us in terms of thinking about our responsibility when it comes to evangelism, but the second half of our message is going to deal with the larger issue Paul has been addressing since the start of chapter 9, which is why have the Jews on a whole rejected the gospel while many Gentiles on the other hand were being saved.

So let’s begin this process of reverse engineering by turning open in your Bible with me to the tenth chapter of the book of Romans. While I hope you would bring your own personal Bible with you each Sunday, we do have pew Bibles available for you to follow along in. We will be giving our attention to v. 14-21 of Romans 10 today, which can be found on pg. 946 of the pew Bibles, should you be using one of those. Let’s first read the passage in its entirety and then we’ll unpack it together as we work through it verse by verse. Paul writes this, starting at v. 14. **“How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!’ But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, ‘Lord, who has believed what he has heard from us?’ So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.**

**But I ask, have they not heard? Indeed they have, for
‘Their voice has gone out to all the earth,
and their words to the ends of the world.’**

**But I ask, did Israel not understand? First Moses says,
‘I will make you jealous of those who are not a nation;
with a foolish nation I will make you angry.’**

**Then Isaiah is so bold as to say,
'I have been found by those who did not seek me;
I have shown myself to those who did not ask for me.'**

But of Israel he says, 'All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and contrary people.'"

As you can see, there's a lot going on here and it can be a bit overwhelming and confusing on your first reading. But fear not, my friends! I'll help break it down for you by working through it verse by verse so we can be clear on why Paul is quoting all these passages from the OT and what he's trying to demonstrate through them. But to begin, we need to give our attention to the first two verses we have in front of us, v. 14-15, and so our first point of the message this morning concerns...

A. The process of evangelism

Paul reverse engineers the process of evangelism in v. 14-15 in response to what he said back in v. 13. There he quoted from the OT saying, "*For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.*" Last week Paul laid out two trails of salvation: by work and by faith, and while Israel had been unsuccessfully pursuing salvation by works, salvation by faith in Christ was available to all – Jews and Gentiles – who called upon the name of the Lord. So now he's working backwards from v. 13: in order for someone to call on the name of the Lord, what needs to happen? What are the steps necessary to get someone to the point of calling upon Christ for salvation? So let's work through these beginning with the end point, which concerns...

1. Calling

Why does Paul begin with calling on the Lord? Shouldn't believing be the end point of the process of salvation? Is calling on the name of the Lord something we need to do in addition to believing in Christ? Last week we talked about this a bit when we got to v. 9 of chapter 10. Look there for a moment. Paul said, "If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." Paul connects calling or confessing Christ with your lips as the natural outworking of faith: it demonstrates that faith is indeed living and active. Believing isn't just a one-time thing you do and then forget about it. It's creates an on-going relationship with Christ that involves continually calling upon him.

A clear demonstration of one's faith is shown by calling out to the Lord. Consider how this looks in the Psalms for example. Psalm 18:3 says, "I call upon the Lord, who is worthy to be praised, and I am saved from my enemies." Psalm 50:15 says, "Call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me." In Psalm 91:15 it says, "When he calls to me, I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble; I will rescue him and honor him." And then Psalm 145:18, "The Lord is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth." It's the normal practice of believers to call upon God.

Do you call on Jesus? I sure hope you do. “Jesus, help me in his situation I’m facing.” “Please Lord Jesus, give me strength today because I’m so weak.” “Be my strength and shield in this temptation that has come upon me.” “Jesus, I ask you to heal my body of this illness.” Those are the kinds of things Christians say. So this calling upon the name of Jesus is exactly what believers do.

This then bring us to our second point of the process of evangelism, moving in reverse, which is...

2. Believing

Look at the first question Paul raises in v. 14. **“How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed?”** You have to first believe in Christ in order to call upon him. No one will call on the Lord if they don’t possess faith to begin with.

For example, I never call on the name of Zeus. Maybe you’ve heard of Zeus: he’s the Greek god of thunder who rules over the other gods from Mount Olympus. They say he’s a pretty powerful god, but I don’t call on him. I never ask him to help me out of a tight spot or heal me from sickness or help me get a job. Do you know why (other than the fact that if I did you would have really good ground to fire me)? It’s because I don’t believe in him. He’s a false god. He’s a mythological deity made up by the ancient Greeks. If I don’t believe he exists, then I’m not going to call on him for any help. No one is going to pray to a god they don’t believe in.

So it is for us when it comes to evangelism. People aren’t going to call upon Christ as Savior unless they first believe he exists. They have to believe he lived the perfect, righteous life we should have lived, that he suffered the wrath of God for us on the cross, and that three days later he rose from the dead and is now seated in glory at the right hand of God the Father. If they don’t believe that, they won’t call on him. So this is more than just believing Jesus existed as a historical figure. Lots of people believe that. I believe George Washington was a historical figure but I don’t call out to him to help me when I’m sick or suffering. “Hear me now, O mighty Crosser of the Delaware, and heal my wounds.” I don’t make any such silly plea because I know George Washington cannot help me. He’s dead and gone. So also will no one call out to Jesus if they think of him as nothing more than a normal human teacher who was crushed by the jaws of social injustice. Believing means not just believing Jesus existed but that he was who he claimed to be: the sinless Son of God who died, was raised, and who ascended into heaven and now reigns in glory as Lord and Savior over all.

So in order to call on the Lord we need to first believe in him. This brings us to the third element in this reverse engineering of evangelism and that involves...

3. Hearing

Look once again at the middle of v. 14. The next question Paul asks is this, **“And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard?”** This is the

next logical step backwards in the process of evangelism. You can't believe in Jesus if you haven't heard of him. Nobody is going to turn from their sins and trust Christ as their Savior unless they've first heard of him. I know in our culture with its churches on every corner and Gideon Bibles in every hotel room, it's inconceivable to think of someone not having heard of Christ and the cross. But as Christianity becomes more and more marginalized in our culture, it's becoming more likely that you'll meet people who haven't heard much about Jesus, other than his name used occasionally as a curse word. And of course, there are many places in the world where the name of Jesus is virtually unknown. If you live in a predominantly Muslim or Hindu country like Iran or India, it quite possible you could live your whole life without ever hearing about Jesus at all.

So if someone like that has never heard of Jesus, if they don't know anything about him, then they're never going to believe in him. You can't put your trust in a Savior you've never heard of. So how are they going to hear about Jesus so they can believe? That leads us to our next point...

4. Preaching

Paul asks at the end of v. 14, **“And how are they to hear without someone preaching?”** Proclaiming the gospel is the primary way that God has ordained for people to learn about Jesus. That's not to say that people don't sometimes come to Christ through opening up a Bible randomly or by finding a gospel tract and alone in their room they turn from their sins and trust in Christ. Yes, sometimes that happens. But the main way that God awakens faith in people is through preaching – and by that he doesn't mean just giving a sermon from a pulpit like I'd doing right now – he means more generally telling others about Christ in personal conversations.

It's been attributed to Saint Francis the popular saying, “Preach the gospel always; if necessary, use words.” Well St. Francis, words are absolutely necessary. Living a morally virtuous life before you co-workers isn't evangelism. They're not hearing the gospel from you if you only happen to not swear and avoid gossiping and champion the right candidate during election season. The good news needs to be proclaimed: you need to explain to people about how Christ suffered God's wrath for our sin on the cross, and how one needs to repent of sin and turn to Christ in faith. Evangelism won't happen if we don't open our mouths and explain to people who Jesus is and what's he done.

But there's one more step Paul wants us to take as he reverse engineers the process of evangelism for us and this takes us to...

5. Sending

Paul says in v. 15, **“And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!’”** God has been in the business of sending people to go and proclaim the good news of his redeeming love. Isaiah answered that call when replied, “Here am I! Send me” in

Isaiah 6. Jonah was called to Nineveh and, after a bit of convincing in the belly of a fish, he eventually went. Jesus sent his disciples to go out into Galilee as fishers of men. And every Christian has been sent by our Lord who commanded us to go and make disciples of all nations in Matthew 28. So this isn't a passage that's applicable only for missionaries and pastors, though it's often used for commissioning services and rightly so. But it's no less true for each and every one of us. We've been sent by our Lord to preach the gospel so people can hear about Christ, believe in him and call upon him as their Lord and Savior.

So don't think to yourself, "I haven't been sent by a church or a mission agency and therefore I don't need to speak." If you are a Christian, you have been sent and so your attitude should be like Isaiah where you eagerly say, "Here am I! Send me." Send me to reach the people I work with. Send me to my fellow students at school. Send me to tell my family and neighbors about Christ. Send me, if need be, to go and proclaim the excellencies of Christ to an unreached people group half-way across the globe. **"How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news,"** Paul says, because they're used by God to move them to into proximity to people so they can hear the gospel, believe the gospel, and call upon the One the gospel points to: Christ Jesus, the Savior of sinners.

So let me say that my heart for this church is that we might be a church of beautiful feet! How's that's for a new church name? Instead of "Grace Fellowship" we could be "The Church of Beautiful Feet." Okay, maybe that's not the best church name but it would be a wonderful reality, wouldn't it? If we were characterized by living out the Great Commission by going forth and preaching the gospel so the lost can hear it and believe, that would make us a church of beautiful feet, even if we don't formally change our name. But that should be true of us, because we have the most wonderful, beautiful news to proclaim and God has sent us to preach it.

So we've walked through this reverse engineering of the gospel in v. 14-15, but we still need to consider why Paul has included this here at all. Why is he backtracking through the process of evangelism here? What's his point, other than to give us a few great verses to preach on during missionary commissioning services? Well, to answer that, we need to shift out to the wide-angle lens of what has been the overarching topic since the beginning of chapter 9 and that is...

B. The problem with Israel

The major issue that has concerned Paul in these past two chapters is why Israel for the most part is failing to come to faith in Christ while the Gentiles are being saved? If the Jews had all these advantages of the law and the prophets, why are the Gentiles being saved in overwhelming numbers compared to the Jews? Although this is surprising, Paul is trying to demonstrate in this passage that is should not be unexpected, because God had predicted this situation long ago in the OT.

So Paul says this in v. 16-17, **“But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, ‘Lord, who has believed what he has heard from us?’ So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.”** In part, Paul is reiterating what he said in v. 14-15. Faith comes by hearing and what needs to be heard is the word of Christ, the gospel, preached. Nevertheless he says in v. 16, **“But they have not all obeyed the gospel,”** referring to the Jews. Why is that? Where does the problem lie?

Paul considers one possibility in v. 18. Look there with me. **“But I ask, have they not heard? Indeed they have, for ‘Their voice has gone out to all the earth, and their words to the ends of the world.’”** Paul quotes from Psalm 19 and uses a passage that talks about God’s revelation of himself that goes out to all people through nature and applies it to the gospel. His point is that the failure of the Jews to respond to the gospel isn’t their lack of opportunity to hear it. Jesus came to the Jews during his earthly ministry. Paul preached the gospel throughout his missionary journeys, always speaking in local synagogues upon first arriving in the city. The Jews have been given ample opportunity to hear the gospel. That’s not the problem.

But then Paul goes on to raise a second possibility in v. 19. He says, **“But I ask, did Israel not understand?”** To that he gives a two-part answer, both quoting from the OT. He goes on to say this, **“First Moses says, ‘I will make you jealous of those who are not a nation; with a foolish nation I will make you angry.’ Then Isaiah is so bold as to say, ‘I have been found by those who did not seek me; I have shown myself to those who did not ask for me.’”**

The **“nation”** being referred to by Moses in the first quotation as well as by Isaiah in the second quotation is the Gentiles. Paul’s reminding them that Moses predicted this would happen: Israel would be provoked by the Gentiles responding to God in faith instead of them. Israel should not have been ignorant of this fact. They should have understood this. So they’re without excuse.

Second, Isaiah foretold that God in his mercy was going to reveal himself to those who did not seek him nor were looking for him. In other words, salvation is a gift of grace. It’s not dependent on God waiting around for us to get our act together and start seeking him. God has been gracious to reveal himself as Savior to sinners who were dead in their sins and not seeking after him whatsoever. You might have thought the Jews would have learned something of this from their own history when God revealed himself to their forefather Abraham, a man living in a pagan culture who wasn’t seeing God or much less even knew of him. Again, the Jews should have known this. They should have understood that God is gracious to reveal himself to those who weren’t even looking for him. So no, the issue with the Jews isn’t ignorance. They had this revealed to them in Scripture.

The real issue for Israel’s rejection of Christ isn’t because nobody was sent to them or because they didn’t hear or were unable to understand the message. The process of evangelism didn’t break down at any of those points. The reason for their rejection of the gospel is given in yet another OT quotation in v. 21. Look there in your Bibles with

me one more time. **“But of Israel he says, ‘All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and contrary people.’”**

The fault is in them. They were disobedient and contrary. Their hearts were stubborn. They willfully rejected the good news. Jesus and the apostles were sent, they preached the good news to them, the Jews heard it and... here's where the problem lies... they refused to believe. God held out his hands to them in that they were given opportunities to repent and believe. Jesus came to the Jews. He lived and died within boundaries of Israel. The invitations to them to come and find rest and take on his easy yoke, to turn from sin and find forgiveness, to have whoever believe in him find eternal life, were all genuine offers by God given originally to the Jews. He held out his hands to them and they, of their own rebellious choice, refused to accept it. The fault for their unbelief does not rest with God; it's upon them. Instead of faith and repentance, they chose to pursue their own righteousness by works. Instead of listening to the gentle and inviting words of their Messiah, they cried out, "Crucify him!" Instead of submitting to Christ, they executed him. They took the hands of God that were reaching out to them in love and instead drove nails through them.

Conclusion

So what does this all mean for us then? As a wrap this up, I want you to simply see that Israel was in a bed of it own making. God saw to it that they heard the gospel for he sent prophets, apostles, and Christ himself to them. He's not to blame: they are. They chose to reject Christ and God holds them accountable for their choices. God's sovereignty over who he chooses to save doesn't negate our responsibility to believe. Paul doesn't blame God for Israel's unbelief: he places the blame squarely on their shoulders.

So it is still today. We're held responsible for our choices; God is responsible for changing hearts so the spiritually dead can be made alive, but our sin is our own. It's not forced upon us: if we choose to reject Christ, then we're rightfully held responsible for it. What was true for Israel is still true for us today.

But in spite of hardness of hearts that still remain, whether for the Jews or for Gentiles, we have a responsibility to make sure they have an opportunity to hear the gospel. We've been sent by God to preach the gospel so those who need to hear it can hear it. We are part of the vital chain of evangelism that God uses to call people to himself, and so in spite of whether people respond to us in faith or with hate, we who have been sent by Christ need to go and preach the word of Christ.

Let's be faithful to the task we've been sent to do this week and always. Let's pray.

This sermon was addressed originally to the people at Grace Fellowship of Waterloo, IA by Pastor Rob Borkowitz. Copyright 2018.