

Lifestyle Evangelism Refuted

by Curtis Hutson

There is a teaching abroad today called "lifestyle evangelism." This false philosophy teaches that we witness with our life rather than our lips.

In one article the author contrasted lifestyle evangelism with confrontational evangelism. For the most part those who teach lifestyle evangelism speak critically of aggressive soul winners. In his book on the subject, Joseph Aldrich said, "Sometimes the only exposure to evangelism for believers is being part of a weekly task force on a 'spiritual safari' into enemy territory. On such forays total strangers are confronted with a verbal message said to be the Gospel."

We suppose he had reference to a weekly visitation program which is conducted in most independent, Bible-believing, soul winning churches. We have preached in some of the greatest soul winning churches in America, and we don't know of any preacher or Christian who sees soul winning visitation as a "weekly task force on a 'spiritual safari' into enemy territory." Rather, they feel they are simply obeying the Great Commission, "Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature" (Mark 16:15).

Mr. Aldrich makes a difference between what he calls "the verbalization and the incarnation of the Gospel." Nowhere in Scripture is the Christian told to incarnate the Gospel. Rather, he is commanded to preach the Gospel. That is a verbal message.

Aldrich further criticizes personal soul winning by referring to it as "button-holing and evangelical mugging." It may be true that some soul winners could improve their approach, but I don't know of any soul winner that I would accuse of "evangelical mugging."

The lifestyle evangelist says, "We need only to live a good, consistent Christian life before the unsaved, and eventually he will notice in us something that will cause him to want to trust Christ as Saviour." No such teaching is found in the Bible. A good, consistent Christian life gives credibility to the witness but, in and of itself, is not a witness and was never intended to lead a soul to Christ.

We are aware that some people attach a different definition to lifestyle evangelism, saying only that soul winning should be a way of life for the Christian. Now we are for that kind of lifestyle evangelism where soul winning is a way of life.

But we are opposed to teaching that discourages personal soul winning. The emphasis of THE SWORD OF THE LORD and Sword of the Lord Conferences has always been revival and soul winning.

Are men won to Christ by one's lifestyle?

1. Lifestyle Evangelism Refuted by the Scriptures

The Scriptures make it clear that one is saved by the Word of God and not a Christian's lifestyle. The Bible says in I Peter 1:23, "Being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever." In verse 25 of the same chapter, Peter says, "But the word of the Lord endureth for ever. And this is the word which by the gospel is preached unto you."

Nowhere does the Bible teach that one is won to the Saviour simply by observing the life of a dedicated Christian. The Bible plainly states in Romans 10:17, "So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God."

Notice, the Scripture does not say, 'Faith cometh by observation, and observation by a good lifestyle.' Paul said in I Corinthians 1:21, "... it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe." Here again the Scriptures say nothing about God's being pleased to save people through someone's lifestyle. No, no! "It pleased God by the foolishness of PREACHING to save them that believe."

The Great Commission is found five times in the New Testament. In Mark 16:15 the Lord commissioned us, "Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature." Notice again, He does not say, 'Go ye into all the world and live a good Christian life before every creature, and I will save those who believe.'

Now, I am for living a good Christian life. And a good testimony makes us a more effective soul winner. But I do not personally know of anyone who has ever been led to Christ simply by observing someone's good life.

Verse after verse throughout the Bible makes it plain that men are to be confronted with the Gospel. Proverbs 29:1 says, "He, that being often reprov'd hardeneth his neck, shall suddenly be destroyed, and that without remedy."

The last invitation of the Bible is found in Revelation 22:17: "And the Spirit and the bride say, Come. And let him that heareth say, Come. And let him that is athirst come. And whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely."

Notice the words in this great invitation, "And the Spirit and the bride **say**, Come. And let him that **heareth say**, Come."

This is a verbal message that is heard - not a so-called "incarnated Gospel" that is observed.

Romans 10 gives the whole machinery of salvation: "For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved. How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? and how shall they believe in him of whom they have not **heard**? and how shall they **hear** without a preacher?" (vss. 13,14).

Notice here that a man is saved by believing on the Lord Jesus Christ.

But the Bible raises a question: "And how shall they believe in him of whom they have not **heard**?" It does not say, 'How shall they believe unless someone lives a good Christian life before them?' That is simply not in the Bible.

Notice again, " ... and how shall they hear without a preacher?" It doesn't say, 'How shall they hear without someone to live it before them?'

The Bible is as plain as day. No one need misunderstand it. It is impossible to find so-called lifestyle evangelism in this clear passage which gives the whole machinery of salvation. Those who make fun of confrontational evangelism make fun of the Bible because the Bible knows no other kind of evangelism.

2. Lifestyle Evangelism Refuted by the Saviour

If anyone was ever able to lead a soul to salvation by His lifestyle, it would have certainly been the Lord Jesus Christ. He was righteousness personified. He was perfection in a human body. He never sinned.

The Bible says in Hebrews 4:16, "For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all

points tempted like as we are, yet without sin." When Pilate turned Him over to the angry mob, He said, "I find no fault in him" (John 19:6). The Bible states in II Corinthians 5:21, "For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin ... "

Though Jesus was perfect, there is no account in the Scripture where anyone was ever saved by observing His lifestyle. Jesus was the greatest personal soul winner who ever lived. In John chapter 4 He went by the well of Samaria while His disciples went to town to buy meat. In the words of Scripture, "he must needs go through Samaria" (vs. 4). Those familiar with the Bible know that He went to this well to create an opportunity to tell a fallen woman about the living water.

One needs only to read this passage to see that Jesus confronted the woman. He even confronted her with her sin, saying that she had had five husbands and the man with whom she was living was not her husband. He went on to say in verse 10, "If thou knewest the gift of God, and who it is that saith to thee, Give me to drink: thou wouldest have asked of him, and he would have given thee living water." There is no way to read lifestyle evangelism into the story of the wonderful conversion of the woman at the well.

In the conversion of Zacchaeus recorded in Luke 19, Jesus said unto Zacchaeus in verse 5, " ... make haste, and come down; for to day I must abide at thy house." That's confrontational evangelism.

In the case of Matthew, Jesus said, "Follow me." And the Bible says, "And he arose and followed him" (Mark 2:14). That's confrontational evangelism.

We do not know of one single case in all the Bible where anyone was ever saved by observing the lifestyle of Jesus. And even if that were the case, that would not be an argument for lifestyle evangelism because

Jesus Christ was God in human flesh. He was perfection personified, and no human being can ever attain to that lifestyle.

In praying for future generations who would be saved, Jesus said in John 17:20, "Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their *word*." Jesus knew that all who would believe on Christ, would do so because of a verbal message. That is why He prayed for those who would believe on Him THROUGH THE WORD of other Christians, not through the lifestyle of other Christians.

3. Lifestyle Evangelism Refuted by the Saints

The New Testament is filled with soul winning examples. But every soul was won through confrontational evangelism.

Let's take the woman at the well in John 4, who may have been the greatest soul winner in the New Testament other than Jesus Himself. The Bible says in verse 39, "And many of the Samaritans of that city believed on him for the **saying** of the woman, which **testified**, He told me all that ever I did."

This poor, fallen woman could not have possibly witnessed with her lifestyle. She had been married five times and was living with a man who was not her husband. Perhaps everyone in town knew her sinful lifestyle. But when she told them about Jesus, many believed.

The Scriptures plainly say that many "believed on him for the *saying* of the woman which *testified* ... " They did not believe because of her lifestyle but because of her saying - that is, a verbal message.

John the Baptist was a witness. The Bible says in John 1:6-8: "There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. The same came for a **witness**, to bear **witness** of the Light, that all men through him might believe. He was not that Light, but was sent to bear **witness** of that Light."

Now how did John witness, with his lifestyle or with his lips? In verse 23 of the same chapter, he said, "I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness." Notice, he did not say, 'I am the life of one demonstrating in the wilderness.'

Now again we must say that a good, consistent Christian life backs up the verbal witness, but the life itself is not a witness. John was the voice of one, and every believer is the voice of one. Are we using our voice to tell others about the Saviour?

The book of Acts tells of multitudes who believed on the Lord Jesus Christ. And how did these early disciples witness? The Bible says in Acts 8:4, "Therefore they that were scattered abroad went every where preaching the word." That is confrontational evangelism. That is verbalizing the Gospel.

Acts 5:42 says, "And daily in the temple, and in every house, they ceased not to teach and preach Jesus Christ." Notice again, they were teaching and preaching. No lifestyle evangelism here. As a matter of fact, this was aggressive New Testament soul winning. They did not wait for people to come to them; they were going from house to house teaching and preaching Jesus Christ.

We wonder if those who teach lifestyle evangelism would say these early Christians were "part of a daily task force on a 'spiritual safari' into enemy territory confronting total strangers with a verbal message said

to be the Gospel." Or would they accuse them of "button-holing and evangelical mugging"?

John 1 records how Andrew led his brother Simon Peter to Christ. Verses 40 through 42 say:

"One of the two which heard John speak, and followed him, was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. He first findeth his own brother Simon, and saith unto him, We have found the Messias, which is, being interpreted, the Christ. And he brought him to Jesus. And when Jesus beheld him, he said, Thou art Simon the son of Jona: thou shalt be called Cephas, which is by interpretation, A stone."

There is no lifestyle evangelism here; this is confrontational: "He **findeth** his brother". "He ... **saith** unto him."

He found him and confronted him with a verbal message. While some may make fun of and laugh at that kind of evangelism, it is the only kind the Bible knows anything about.

4. Lifestyle Evangelism Refuted by Sinners

Luke 16 records the account of the rich man and Lazarus:

"There was a certain rich man, which was clothed in purple and fine linen, and fared sumptuously every day: And there was a certain beggar named Lazarus, which was laid at his gate, full of sores, And desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man's table: moreover the dogs came and licked his sores. And it came to pass, that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom: the rich man also died, and was buried; And in hell he lift up his eyes, being in

torments, and seeth Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom. And he cried and said, Father Abraham, have mercy on me and send Lazarus, that he may dip the tip of his finger in water, and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame. But Abraham said, Son, remember that thou in thy lifetime receivest thy good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things: but now he is comforted, and thou art tormented. And beside all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed: so that they which would pass from hence to you cannot; neither can they pass to us, that would come from thence. Then he said, I pray thee therefore, father, that thou wouldest send him to my father's house: For I have five brethren; that he may testify unto them, lest they also come into this place of torment. Abraham saith unto him, They have Moses and the prophets: let them hear them. And he said. Nay. father Abraham: but if one went unto them from the dead, they will repent. And he said unto him, If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead." - Luke 16:19-31.

You will notice in this passage that the rich man asked father Abraham to send Lazarus that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool his tongue. But Abraham reminded the rich man that a gulf was fixed and no one could pass over the great gulf.

Then the rich man said in verses 27,28, "I pray thee therefore, father, that thou wouldest send him to my father's house: For I have five brethren; that he may testify unto them, lest they also come into this place of torment."

The rich man did not ask Abraham to send Lazarus back so that he may incarnate the Gospel but rather that he could verbalize the Gospel. In the rich man's words, "that he may testify unto them." Abraham answered in verse 29, "They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them."

The rich man did not ask Abraham to send Lazarus back to live a good Christian life before his five brothers. The fact of the matter is, Lazarus was a good Christian, but the rich man was not saved as a result of Lazarus' lifestyle; and neither would his five brothers be saved unless Lazarus testified to them. "So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Rom. 10:17).

We have had the opportunity of leading thousands of souls to Christ, but I have never had one person say to me, "I am trusting Christ because of the way you live." However, I have had many say to me, "Thanks for telling me about Christ," or "I never really understood how to be saved until you explained it."

5. Lifestyle Evangelism Refuted by Sensible Logic

The Bible emphasizes the urgency of salvation. Second Corinthians 6:2 says, "Now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation." And Hebrews 4:7 says, "To day if ye will hear his voice, harden not your hearts."

Since the matter of salvation is urgent, why should we wait several weeks or even months to witness to a friend or even a stranger? Those who teach lifestyle evangelism say that we should live it before the individual perhaps weeks, or even months, before we present a verbal witness. In the words of lifestyle evangelists, we should "incarnate" the Gospel before we verbalize it. To do otherwise is so-called "evangelical mugging."

If salvation is the most important thing in the world - and it is - then why should we run the risk of a man's dying and going to Hell before we finally get around to a verbal witness?

I remember being called to the hospital in the middle of the night by a dear lady whose sister was dying. She said, "Pastor, I hate to bother you in the middle of the night, but the doctor says my sister has only a few hours to live. She has never trusted Christ as Saviour. Won't you please come and see if you can talk with her before she dies."

So in the middle of the night I dressed and drove to the hospital. The family was there, and this dear lady took me into the room where her sister was dying. I was not sure the lady could understand me, so I asked if she could hear me to let me know by moving a finger. And she did.

I told her the old, old story of Jesus and His love. And though she was unable to speak, she trusted Christ as Saviour. I remember saying, "Dear lady, if you will trust Christ as Saviour, would you let me know it by simply moving your right hand?" I placed my hand near hers, and very weakly she took my hand and squeezed it as hard as she could.

Her sister, who was watching, began to weep with joy. There was a holy presence in the room as this lady went out to meet the Saviour.

There was no time here for me to witness with my lifestyle. I had only a few minutes with this dear lady before she died and went to Heaven.

Just this week I boarded a plane to fly to New Jersey for a Bible conference. Every seat was filled, and I had a window seat. Sitting next to me was a young engineer. We had not been flying very long before he asked me if my trip was business or pleasure. Smiling, I said, "Business. I wouldn't be flying to New Jersey this time of year on a pleasure trip!"

Then he inquired, "What kind of business are you in?" I explained that I was a preacher and was going to speak in a conference. The gentleman was very friendly, and we talked about his new home in Atlanta.

After a few minutes I handed him a gospel tract entitled, *How to Know You Are Going to Heaven*. I said, "Read this and tell me what you think about it." Things were quiet for a few moments as he read the tract.

When he finished he said, "It makes sense." I reviewed the tract asking if he understood that he was a sinner. "Yes," he replied.

I said, "Do you understand that sinners owe a penalty? The Bible says in Romans 6:23, 'The wages of sin is death.' Do you understand that, if we pay what we owe, we must go into Hell and stay there forever and ever?"

"Yes," he replied.

Third, I asked, "Do you really believe that Jesus Christ died on the cross to pay for your sins? Do you believe that all your sins were laid on Jesus two thousand years ago, just as the Bible says in I Peter 2:24?"

"Yes," he replied.

Then, using his name, I said, "Mr. _____, will you trust Jesus Christ as your Saviour?"

And he replied, "Yes, I will." In a few moments he had prayed and told the Lord he would trust Him. I got his name and address and have written to him since to send some literature for follow up, and I have sent him a gift subscription to THE SWORD OF THE LORD.

Now here is an instance where I could not have lived the Christian life before the man several weeks or months before witnessing to him. The

flight was only an hour and a half, and I had less than two hours to witness to him.

By the way, the last thing I prayed on Sunday night before going to sleep was, "Dear Lord, tomorrow let me sit next to some one on the plane to whom I can witness." And the Lord put me next to a man who opened the conversation and was ready to hear the Gospel.

A preacher told me that he was standing in an airport and passing out tracts. As he offered one man a tract, the man smiled and said, "I already have one." And reaching in his pocket, he showed the preacher a tract identical to the ones he was distributing. It was Dr. Rice's tract, "*What Must I Do to Be Saved?*" The man was a soldier, and he said to the preacher, "The wife of the man who wrote this tract just led me to Christ on the plane and gave me the tract." Mrs. John R. Rice had led this soldier boy to Christ. She had probably never seen him before and would never see him again. But in the short time they had together on the plane, she won him to the Saviour.

No time here for so-called "incarnating" the Gospel-only time for verbalizing the message.

A few evenings ago while traveling, I stopped at a service station to get gas for my automobile. While the man was pumping the gas, I handed him a tract and said, "Here is something that will tell you how to go to Heaven when you die. Will you promise me you'll read it?"

Accepting the tract he said, "Yes, I will."

"By the way, what's your name?" I asked.

"Tom," he replied.

I said, "Tom, I can tell you what is in that tract in just a few minutes." And I began, "All men are sinners." Going through the plan of salvation I explained how that sinners owe a penalty and told him that Jesus Christ died on the cross to pay our sin debt. After explaining the plan of salvation, I asked, "Tom, wouldn't you really like to trust Christ as your Saviour?"

And he said, "Yes."

I said, "If you really mean that, let's shake on it." And he reached out and shook my hand. I then asked him if he would pray and tell Jesus Christ that he was trusting Him as Saviour.

And the dear man prayed, "Dear Lord Jesus, I know that I'm a sinner. I believe that Jesus Christ died for me. And here and now I trust Him as my Saviour." I then asked if I could pray, and I prayed that God would give him assurance of salvation and that he would live for Christ and be a good Christian.

Now some may call this kind of soul winning "evangelical mugging," and I may be accused of being on a "spiritual safari"; but the truth of the matter is, I simply felt that I should witness to the man. I had never seen him before, and I will probably never see him again. Since I was traveling to another state to preach the Gospel, the chances are I will probably never stop at that same service station again.

If it were necessary for me to live the Christian life before the man several weeks or months before witnessing to him, then I could have never led him to Christ.

In closing, let me say that I believe in living a consistent, godly Christian life; and a good testimony makes the soul winner more effective and productive. But there is no teaching in the Bible that we should

demonstrate Christianity several months before trying to lead a soul to Christ.

It is important that soul winners be careful in their approach. I have often said, "The way to a man's heart is not down his throat." I am convinced that some soul winners could improve their approach. The soul winner must learn to be sensitive. Unless you get the individual's attention and unless he is listening, it is not likely that you will win him to Christ. There have been occasions when I felt that I was not getting through to the person; and so I changed the conversation and talked about something else and went back later.

Soul winning is like many other things: the more you do it, the better you can do it. You learn to do by doing.

In trying to lead a soul to Christ, we must be careful not to offend the individual. The Bible says, "A brother offended is harder to be won than a strong city" (Prov. 18:19). But there is no teaching in the Bible that one must live the Christian life before an individual several weeks or months before witnessing to him, that he must befriend him and be sure that he "incarnates" the Gospel before he verbalizes it.