

PLACING CHRISTIAN CONVERSION ON THE ENDANGERED SPECIES LIST

—BY RUDOLPH D. GONZALEZ

There are powerful voices at work today, intent on suppressing the unique claims of Christ in North America. In the modern spirit of religious toleration, many people—among them some Christians—decry the historic appeals made by Christianity to turn to Jesus. For the record, biblical conversion is a rejection of life lived in sin and rebellion from God, and a turn to restored fellowship with Him through Jesus Christ. There is not the slightest hint of salvation as merely the conversion from one religion to another religion. Nevertheless, many misinterpret the call to conversion as an appeal to abandon one's culture, insofar as a native religion is couched in culture, in exchange for a westernized version of Christianity. Nothing could be further from the truth. Yet, perception is everything these days, and many have vested interests in keeping the fabrication alive.

Thus, they suggest that in a religiously diverse community, such as North America continues to become, there is no place for what they perceive as the continuation of American imperialism. Such people promote their brand of *open mindedness* and *respect for all religions*, which no honest Christian would deny. However, these cannot be practiced at the expense of a Christian's core beliefs and convictions. What often underlies these charges against evangelism is the desire for a new *macro-ecumenism* that seeks to create common acts of worship among all religions—usually, at the expense of doctrinal tenets vital to the very nature of the gospel of Christ.

Excising the evangelical mandate, however, is out of the question, if one wishes to keep any semblance of biblical Christianity. And in spite of those who see Christian evangelism as a *radicalization* of the faith, the call to conversion is integral to its nature. Biblical Christianity is nothing if it is not good news for all of humanity. The call to conversion and faith in Christ comes from the very lips of Jesus (see Matt. 11:28–30; John 10:9; 14:6). We should ask ourselves, in light of the growing chorus of voices that call for Christians to reject the active evangelization of all peoples—should historic, biblical Christianity be banished from North America today?

Evangelism: A Candidate for the Endangered Species List?

Recently I have done some reading on the subject of endangered species in North America, and I was impressed by the ardent efforts of people to save fragile species, many of which cling to existence by a thread. The zeal of these activists is remarkable. There is little compromise, especially when the veritable survival of a species may be at stake.

The evangelical church in North America can learn something from those who seek the revitalization of endangered species. It struck me that those who desire to suppress evangelism would, in actuality, accomplish the extinction of the Christian faith in North America, were they to be successful. The

extinction of animal and plant life on our planet is a serious issue, and one that we should all do something about.¹ The possible extinction of a religious point of view from our culture—which, by the way, has been its fertile habitat since the mid 17th century—ought to be no less alarming.

A basic presupposition for most of those who seek to preserve endangered species is the firm belief that all animal and plant life is valuable and the world is diminished whenever any species, no matter how scarce or insignificant it is, becomes lost by its extinction. The presupposition is not without value to the issue of the survival of evangelical conversion.

Question: Should the call for conversion be made extinct? The number of forces working tirelessly to save the *rose purple sandverbena*, do not begin to match those that are working to see the exclusive appeal to faith in Christ go the way of the *dodo bird*.

I ask more specifically: Is not an idea—in this case the gospel—as valuable a thing as the *white-footed tree-rat*? And is not such an idea worth preserving?

Never mind that for me the gospel is more than a mere idea on par with human thought. I openly confess my belief that the gospel is the divine message of God for fallen humanity. The gospel is the story of God's unconditional love to save any and all who confess Jesus Christ as their Savior. However, I am not arguing that the gospel is worth salvaging because it is the Word of God. To the secular person, religious truths are the product of an elevated human consciousness. I am arguing here that even if we should concede that the gospel is mere human thought and reflection, it ought to be speech that is allowed without infringement. By their standards, those who see it as human speech should be honest enough to concede that it is a point of view, which should be allowed to thrive or perish in the free market place of ideas.

If anything makes us unique as a human species, it's our ability to reason and think. And what is the product of thought if not ideas? Erase ideas from the world and you erase humanity's unique fingerprint. No endangered fern, reptile, or crustacean leaves such a legacy, and yet we value their continued existence. Why should an idea—and one as powerful as the gospel—be accorded any less of a guarantee for its survival?

When preservationists argue for the protection of endangered species they usually appeal to some variation of three basic reasons. First, from a research perspective, all species have potential medical and medicinal properties that may benefit humanity. Plants often fall into this category. Second, environmentalists argue that endangered species are necessary to maintain biological systems in balance. The presence of insect populations, for example, can have tremendous ramifications for the world's ecology. The third reason is one of aesthetics. Proponents insist that all species ought to be protected if for no other reason than for the sake of human enjoyment. Thus, virtually all mammals, reptiles, birds, and fish fall into this category.²

¹According to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service at the time of this report, there are 746 species of plants and 516 species of animals on the endangered species list in North America alone (see http://ecos.fws.gov/tess_public/TessStatReport and <http://species.fws.gov>). Earth Witness, an environmental organization has compiled a list of species of animals that have become extinct in North America over the past two centuries (see <http://www.earthwitness.com>).

²The foregoing reasons are clearly articulated in the Endangered Species Act signed by President Nixon in 1973. The law has the expressed aim of protecting species of esthetic, ecological, educational, historical, recreational, and scientific value.

I would like to marshal the same three reasons to defend the gospel from those who would see its extinction from our daily conversation. First, we must ask if the gospel fits the criteria of it having potential medical value. Certainly, it does not in the same way as an endangered plant might have a quality that could lead to the cure for a disease. But, then again, it is ideas that ultimately advance the therapeutic potentialities of a species. Without an idea the potential remains dormant. In this sense, ideas are exponentially more powerful and valuable. And it is beyond doubt that the gospel has a 2,000-year track record of therapeutic value to the human race.

Take prison recidivism, for example. Anthony Brooks, a correspondent for WBUR—the Boston-based National Public Radio (NPR) affiliate—investigated whether Christianity makes a measurable difference in the lives of prisoners. In his article entitled, “Leap of Faith,” Brooks examines the InnerChange Freedom Initiative, a faith-based prison program founded by Chuck Colson.

Recidivism is a national problem: about 40 percent of prison inmates end up back in jail within three years of being released. Compare that to InnerChange. National operations director Jack Cowley says, of the first hundred or so inmates who went through the first InnerChange program in Texas, only six have landed back in jail. That's a rearrest rate of just 6 percent. Cowley says it's the religion that makes the difference.³

Many people have been liberated from self destructive vices by the power of the gospel. Countless hospitals exist today because of the gospel. Multitudes of people have surrendered to the mission field to help in the most deplorable spots on the earth because of the call they receive whenever the gospel is unapologetically proclaimed. Christian relief agencies abound. While there are always exceptions, most people who undergo biblical conversion are made the better for it.

This first reason is basically an appeal to the unique properties that are lost when a given species succumbs to extinction. We appropriately value endangered species for their uniqueness. We understand that if we lose a specific plant or animal species, all the others combined do not recover the loss of the one. This is why industries are often denied access to an area for the sake of an endangered plant or fish. We reason that if the *spotted owl* is lost to us, all the *horned owls* in the world do not a *spotted owl* make. Do we not see why it is equally important to champion the right, and the necessity to let the voice of the gospel be heard for what it is? It is a unique message, unlike that of other religions. And if it goes, all the other religious messages combined do not equal its singular message.

What about the second reason? Does anyone truly believe that if the gospel were silenced it would not be a profound loss for the North American culture? Recently, we heard of the burning of the Iraqi National Library in the aftermath of the war. Nearly two-thirds of the books in the library were burned to ashes. The tragedy was reported as a loss to the world, and rightly so. Why? Is it not because we know that the history and knowledge of ancient civilizations contained in those books and manuscripts were truly priceless? And what was in those volumes if not the thoughts and reflections of past civilizations?

³ See www.publicbroadcasting.net/national/newsroom/features/2001/faith/innerchange.html for the full article.

It is legitimate to ask how some ideas can be deemed more costly than gold, while the gospel—which arguably has had a beneficial impact on our world—is treated with such disdain?

For example, communism, as a political theory, is largely a failed experiment. Recent history has shown this in dramatic fashion. And yet, I doubt libraries across the globe have discarded all the writings of Marx, Engels, and others. Why not? Again, it is necessary to preserve even flawed ideas in order to provide context for understanding our history. Together they provide background to where we are as a thinking people. In fact, their absence would leave a void rendering some aspects of contemporary culture indecipherable. The presence of millions of evangelicals in North America and beyond is unintelligible apart from the *born again* conversion experience. If the gospel goes into extinction because of political correctness, what does that say about the millions who have found meaning and significance in the experience?

We must admit that the gospel is intrinsically offensive to people. It tells us we are all sinners and in need of God's grace through Christ. However, since when has offensiveness been the criteria for extinction? The U.S. Fish and Wildlife agency does not use pleasantness or offensiveness as criterion when deciding which species to protect. Is the endangered *razorback sucker fish* not offensive to people throughout Arizona, California, Colorado, New Mexico, Nevada, Utah, and Wyoming, who have had to modify their water management for a fish that weighs no more than several ounces? What is often characterized as *offensive*, however, turns out, rather, to be *unique*. And because it is distinctive we go to great pains to salvage it from extinction, regardless of the offence to other interests.⁴

Finally, some species are rescued from extinction primarily because of the enjoyment they offer humanity. The *California condor* is a prime example. Nearly extinct in the 1970s, today it flies over the Grand Canyon for all visitors to enjoy. Does the gospel have human enjoyment value? It does if, by enjoyment, we mean entertainment in the classical sense. Watching the California condor soar is certainly enjoyable, but it is more than that. It is entertaining. Let me explain. Seeing this great vulture spread its 10-foot wingspan won't make you laugh. Its majestic presence as it soars in the sky will capture your undivided attention. Similarly, the Bible message is sheer entertainment in the most profound sense.⁵ With its open invitation to one and all, its message of unconditional love will hold the reader. Its message of grace grips the mind and will not let go. Arguably, no other book has *entertained* the mind of man more than has the Bible. Is the gospel entertaining to humanity? You bet!

Conclusion

Not long ago I was confronted by an Orthodox Jew who berated the efforts of a group of evangelical Christians to evangelize a community where there was a sizable Jewish presence. The man stood no more than a foot away and virtually screamed directly into my face. He went on for about five minutes,

⁴The charge that Christianity is offensive to people from other cultures is baseless when we realize it isn't only in North America that people are confronted with the claims of Christ. This happens regularly through native and indigenous expressions of Christianity all around the world. North American evangelicals are not advancing some unique American custom. They are engaged in the global mandate of the church. Only in North America and the West do people make such a charge. The fact is, not only do Christians evangelize around the world, but also Islam, in particular, is actively involved in proselytizing efforts of its own. Chris Wright, *The Uniqueness of Jesus*, (Grand Rapids: Monarch Books, 1997), 28.

⁵From the Latin *entretener*, meaning *to hold between, to maintain in the mind*. Webster's *New International Dictionary*, Second ed., s.v., "entertain."

accusing Christians for the Holocaust, and of attempting to adulterate Jewish culture. There were three other evangelicals who fully believed that I would be allowed to respond to his charges, but the man was not interested in an honest and civil discussion. No sooner did he finish his tirade, but he stormed out, giving me no time to respond.

I have reflected much on that event and have concluded the man believed his message was all important, while mine was of little significance. He accused evangelicals of cultural genocide—and worse—and ultimately did not consider the Christian message to be worth a hearing. In the end, his actions reflected what many would like to see happen to Christianity. Enough with the evangelistic appeals for conversion—no one wants to hear it. But, is this right? On all counts, even the most ardent detractors of evangelism ought to concede that because there are so many in the culture who would see the demise of biblical calls to conversion, evangelism should be placed on the endangered list of ideas. For, if they had their way, it would disappear from public discourse, and the world would be diminished by its absence. This must never happen.

The American society prides itself in being a culture where the marketplace dictates if an idea will have continuing relevancy. So, what of the gospel? In spite of those who would silence the message, the call to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ is as relevant today as it has ever been. Countless people who turn to Christ daily testify by their lives of the power of the gospel to give life and to give it abundantly.

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