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## **Section 5**

### **Obstacles to Evangelism**

#### **Part 1: Common obstacles inside ourselves or the church that hinder us from evangelizing the lost?**

I do not think I have to prove to anyone that most Christians do not aggressively engage in evangelism. Very few are active “fishers of men.” Why is this so? My aim here will be to expose some of the more common reasons why many Christians fail to engage in evangelism, and then suggest a cure for each. There is admittedly some measure of overlap between some of these reasons, and we have already touched on some of them previously. However, I believe a concentrated look at these reasons will help us to better deal with them in our personal lives and our churches. Below we will consider 9 obstacles to evangelism.

##### **I. Hold to some bad theology which deflates any passion to evangelize.**

Some Christians do not really believe in hell, or do not believe it really involves **eternal** suffering. Others wrongly apply the doctrine of predestination, thinking that since God is sovereign in who is saved and who not, then they do not need to evangelize, for God will take care of saving those He wishes to save.

??? Do any of you struggle in this area???

##### **What is the cure?**

For the first, remember the words of Jesus who said, “And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.” (Matt 25:46) Jesus confirms that the end of the wicked is **eternal** punishment in hell. This truth should provoke in us a real compassion for the lost.

For the second, remember the words of Paul, who wrote, “Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they also may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory.” (2 Tim 2:10) Paul was willing to lay His life down in evangelism in order that the elect would be saved. The doctrine of election should not put out the fire of evangelism, but rather should increase it.

##### **II. Apathetic about the glory of God and the plight of the lost.**

Concerning the former, many Christians speak of their desire to glorify God, but their willingness to actually do so is limited to those things that are comfortable for them to do, like attending Lord’s Day meetings or reading their Bibles. When challenged with something like evangelizing the lost, they balk and squirm. Glorifying God is not **that** big of a desire for them.

Concerning the lost, many are happy to be “nice” towards them but do not want to be bothered with thinking about their end if they die without Christ. It is too depressing and so they prefer not to have to really face the truth of the matter. Hear the admonishment of David Platt:

While some professing Christians have rejected universalism intellectually, practically they may end up leading universalistic lives. They claim Christ is necessary for salvation, yet they live their Christianity in silence, as if people around them in the world will indeed be okay in

the end without Christ.<sup>1</sup>

Since becoming a Christian, there have been periods of my life where I have, by God's grace, been fervently zealous for evangelism. However, there have also been times where I have sadly been indifferent and flat out negligent. This is a matter I have to regularly pray about lest I fall back into a type of Christianity that looks good on the outside but actually is apathetic about the glory of God and the plight of my neighbor, and hence fails to practice evangelism.

??? Do any of you struggle in this area???

### **What is the cure?**

First, repent of coldness of heart towards God and the lost.

Second, study to learn more about how God is glorified through His people and then pray for passion to live more fully to that end. In evangelism, remember that God is glorified as we declare the excellencies of God's grace in saving sinners.

Also, study the plight of the perishing and think about what that really means for them. Also, meditate on the compassion of Jesus when He saw the multitude (Matt 9:36) and pray that the Spirit of God would work the same in your heart.

Let me ask: Why is it that we can passionately talk with people about the weather, sports, politics or food, but find it hard to love the lost enough to talk with them about their greatest need?

### **III. Look down upon non-Christians as “unclean,” and prefer not to get dirty by having contact with them.**

Some churches promote a view of separation from the world that is unbiblical, resulting in Christians intentionally avoiding all contact with non-Christians. In their view, holiness requires keeping away from the lost lest they become defiled through too much contact with them. This leaves very few opportunities to build relationships with the lost through which to share the gospel. These Christians are happy to do all kinds of church service, as long as it is in the church or connected with other Christians. But when it comes to ministry outside the safety and “cleanliness” of the church, they are unwilling.

??? Do any of you struggle in this area???

### **What is the cure?**

In God's eyes, of course, the lost are unclean because they are still clothed in their robes of unrighteousness. But if we are going to imitate Jesus rather than the Pharisees (Luke 5:30-32), then we must be serious and intentional about being a “friend of sinners,” and get out and “get dirty” by rubbing shoulders with them.

### **IV. Have little significant contact with non-Christians.**

While not separationists in theory, many Christians are in practical life. Throughout our daily lives, we have almost no contact with non-Christians. Or, we have some measure of contact with people

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<sup>1</sup> Platt, David (2010-04-17). Radical: Taking Back Your Faith from the American Dream (p. 142). The Crown Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

who are not Christians, but we never have real, relational contact with them.

??? Do any of you struggle in this area???

**What is the cure?**

We must intentionally plan to develop meaningful contact with non-believers.

**V. Start evangelizing but quit after just a short while because we do not see immediate results.**

Sometimes this attitude is due to no one having forewarned us that the work of evangelism is often nothing more than planting the seed of the gospel or watering seed planted by others, and that others will later come along and do the work of harvesting (John 4:35-38). In other cases, this attitude develops because we have heard a testimony or read a book where it seemed like just about everyone evangelized believed, causing us to have unrealistic expectations.

I can think of a couple of situations where I was only a planter, and God later used someone else to do the harvest. At the time after I finished sharing the gospel with the person, I thought my efforts had been ineffective and I was discouraged. Only later did I find out the person had become a Christian and God had actually used my efforts to plant a seed. So, brethren, do not lose heart when you do not see immediate results.

??? Do any of you struggle in this area???

**What is the cure?**

Church leaders need to inform the congregation that a large part of evangelism involves planting the seed of the gospel for the first time, or watering what someone else has planted. These two aspects of evangelism need to be hailed as extremely important and glorious, so that the saints will not lose heart but will view what they are doing as highly valuable, even if there is no immediate response of faith in Christ!

**VI. Unsure of what to say.**

Some wish to share the gospel with someone, but when they get ready to speak, they feel tongue-tied. For others the problem is that their minds sort of blank out. Either way I have found that for many such people the problem is that they have not taken time to think through what are the basic elements of the gospel, nor do they well understand the faith they profess to believe. Because of this, they stumble and fumble through their words and do not make much sense. Others feel a deep sense of inadequacy. They want to share and have gotten themselves sufficiently prepared, but they still feel as if they just are not “good enough” to do it.

??? Do any of you struggle in this area???

**What is the cure?**

For the first, learn the basics of the gospel and then regularly dig deeper into the glories of each doctrine so that you better understand them and can more clearly explain them.

For the second, remember the words of Paul in 2 Corinthians 4:7, “But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.” Your feeling of inadequacy is

actually proper, and this should turn you from looking to yourself to looking to God to work through your efforts, however feeble they may be. In fact, to be honest, most of us do a poor job when evangelizing the lost. And even those who are best at evangelism could always do it “just a little bit better.” God uses the weak to do His powerful works. Trust Him.

### **VII. Do not have enough time.**

Some say they would like to share the gospel with others, but they are simply too busy to do so. They cannot find the time to go out with others to share, to open their homes for hospitality evangelism, or even to speak about Christ with their coworker for a few minutes after work. A few such Christians are legitimately worn out with personal matters like caring for an elderly parent or for twins, while others are seriously crushed by their workload. For most, however, the real problem is that they have gotten themselves entangled in wasteful activities that they think are a normal part of life and as a result think they have no time to evangelize anyone. They watch lots of TV or movies. They spend lots of time on the internet shopping or reading article after article on their favorite subjects. They give exorbitant amounts of time to their hobbies.

??? Do any of you struggle in this area???

#### **What is the cure?**

For those who have a legitimately busy schedule, the answer is not to feel guilty, but to be faithful in what God has presently given us to do. At the same time, do still look for opportunities. Often there are opportunities to share the gospel in places we would not expect. For example, I have heard of believers busy caring for elderly parents who are complimented by a doctor or a nurse or by a neighbor or an employee in a shop for their love and dedication to their parents, this opening up an opportunity to share the gospel, even if just briefly.

For those who spend time in wasteful pursuits, or who spend too much time in legitimate pursuits, we need to confess our sins of self-centeredness and have the mind of Christ, thinking not only about ourselves but learning to also think about the needs of the lost around us. We also need to learn to exercise self-control in the power of the Holy Spirit. If we waste time with unlawful pursuits, we need to at least put to death those bad habits and perhaps even to get rid of the thing consuming our time. If we spend too much time on legitimate pursuits, we need to set up ways to help us overcome these habits. In the end, the goal is to have more free time available so that we can participate in some form of evangelistic activity through the church, as well as evangelize friends, neighbors, and coworkers.

I have saved what I consider to be the two biggest obstacles for last, the first I will deal with briefly, and the second a little more fully.

### **VIII. Do not disciple members of the church and so they are not equipped to evangelize.**

Many churches have no plan for discipleship and thus are filled with members who are not trained in many areas of the Christian life, including evangelism. As a result, many members do not understand that evangelism is a duty they are to participate in, or if they understand this from reading Scripture and talking with others, they have no idea how to do it and so do not.

??? Do any of you struggle in this area???

#### **What is the cure?**

Churches need to get serious about discipleship. It is tragic when we find people who have trusted in Christ for many years who know very little, at least experientially, about following Christ, and who are not able to serve Him effectively in any area of the Christian life, including evangelism.

### **IX. Fear having to pay the price.**

There is no way to avoid the mocking and rejection of many non-believers when you tell them that God took on human flesh by being born of a virgin, that He lived a sinless life, that He died on a cross for our sins, that He rose from the dead on the third day, and that He has ascended back into heaven and will one day return. Yes, the gospel seems like foolishness to the “wise” of the world (1 Cor 1:18-29), and our message will smell awful in the nostrils of the perishing (2 Cor 2:14-16), so strong reactions against it and us are to be expected. However, because so many churches never instruct members that following Christ includes a cost, but instead cause them to think that following Christ is all about making life here more comfortable and happier, when it comes time to take the risk of possible rejection, ridicule, loss of face or more for the sake of sharing the gospel, most are simply unwilling to do so. Furthermore, even for many who know the cost, self-preservation is more important to them than glorifying God or loving their neighbor through evangelizing them – clear violations of the first and second great commandments.

??? Do any of you struggle in this area???

#### **What is the cure?**

First, Paul wrote, pray “also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains, that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak.” (Eph 6:19-20) Applying this to ourselves, pray for one another and for yourself often that God would grant courage to share the gospel with the lost. Only God can give a holy boldness to face the fierce opposition that often arises against the gospel.

Of course, when I speak of “boldness” here, I am not encouraging us to be obnoxious or rude. What I mean by boldness is clear, direct communication of the gospel in the face of possible opposition or rejection. It is the opposite of hiding the gospel under a bushel because we are afraid of how others will respond.

Listen to these words from Horton:

The early Christians were not fed to wild beasts or dipped in wax and set ablaze as lamps in Nero’s garden because they thought Jesus was a helpful life coach or role model but because they witnessed to him as the only Lord and Savior of the world. Jesus Christ doesn’t just live in the private hearts of individuals as the source of an inner peace. He is the Creator, Ruler, Redeemer, and Judge of all the earth. And now he commands everyone everywhere to repent. All idols are shams. All power and authority not only in heaven but on earth is Christ’s. He has cast Satan out of the heavenly sanctuary, where he prosecuted the saints day and night (Rev. 12). And now, having bound the strong man, he is looting his house on earth, taking back what rightfully belongs to him (Matt. 12:29).<sup>2</sup>

We should be bold, for Christ has defeated Satan and death, and He is alive and seated in heaven on

<sup>2</sup> Michael Horton, *The Gospel Commission: Recovering God’s Strategy for Making Disciples*, Baker Publishing Group, 32-33. Kindle Edition.

the throne above all thrones with all authority in heaven and on earth belonging to Him alone.

What is interesting is that we find in almost **every** case in Scripture that when a person was saved he naturally became an evangelist to others. To look at just one example, turn to Mark 5. Here we read of a man whom Jesus delivered from a legion of demons. What does it say that he did in verse 20? He boldly proclaimed how much Jesus had done for him. If God has done something for us, there is no need to be embarrassed! On the contrary, we should be passionate about telling others. Just think of what we would do if a doctor healed us of cancer. We would not be inhibited in telling others about it. In fact, I often hear Christians and non-Christians alike talking about physical healings. Well, if Jesus has really saved us from our sins, then we should be every-bit-as-much willing to tell others about it.

Second, perfect love casts out fear (1 John 4:18). Love for Jesus and love for the lost is the only “fear-killing” power that can destroy the roots of our fear. So, strive to use the means of grace to grow in love and to put to death the tendency to be so self-centered that we only worry about how people respond to us.

Do not be afraid of awkwardness. Love conquers such feelings and compels us to reach out to others in spite of ourselves. And God’s power is often revealed more in our moments of weakness than in our moments of personal confidence. “But what about the awkwardness of having someone over for a meal, and then when you begin to talk about your faith, they obviously have no interest?” Let love cast out these fears about how weird we feel in such situations and drive us to think about how miserable their situation is, for if they have no interest in the only message by which they can know how to be saved, they will perish.

Third, Paul writes in 2 Timothy 1:8-12 that we must not be ashamed of our Lord and His gospel. The reason? Look in verse 12. We know Him. We know what kind of God He is. We know He is faithful to keep His promises. We know that He is mighty and able to protect us from trouble, and even if death comes, to guard our souls and the inheritance He has prepared for us, ensuring that nothing is lost. This truth is mentioned here to encourage Timothy not to shrink back in the face of opposition but instead to courageously continue to make the gospel known whatever trouble may come. May it have the same effect on us.

Finally, remember that Jesus promised to be with us always (Matt 28:20). Wherever we are trying to make disciples, which is done through evangelism, we are always within the sphere of His jurisdiction. This assurance is important when facing the common negative responses of a hard heart.

Above we have looked at 9 of the main reasons why Christians do not engage in evangelism.

- Some of them require further teaching from Scripture in order to clear away misunderstanding so that Christians are not held back from this duty by wrong teaching.
- Others require repentance, for they show a sinful heart that is causing Christians to refrain from doing something God has called all His people to participate in.

May God give much grace, that we would intentionally work to overcome these obstacles so that the gospel would ring out unhindered and free.

Discussion: Write your answers to the following questions.

- Which item(s) on this list is a particular struggle for you? Or is there some other item not

listed here that obstructs you from engaging in evangelism?

- What have you found helpful for fighting to overcome that struggle(s)?
  
- If you have not dealt with that area(s) of struggle yet, what do you now see you need to do about it? What plan will you make to begin to bring about change?

## **Part 2: Common obstacles outside ourselves and the church that hinder us from evangelizing the lost?**

Not only are there problems within Christians and the church that often cause us not to participate in evangelism. There are also two main obstacles outside ourselves and the church.

### **I. The Opposition of Unbelievers**

In 1 Thessalonians 2:14-16 we read: “For you, brothers, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea. For you suffered the same things from your own countrymen as they did from the Jews, who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out, and displease God and oppose all mankind by hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles that they might be saved - so as always to fill up the measure of their sins. But God's wrath has come upon them at last!” Here we see that the Jews were trying to prevent Paul and his coworkers from preaching the gospel to the Gentiles.

This is not unusual. All throughout church history there have been many who oppose the gospel. Sometimes they want to totally stamp out the church, while at other times they are content if Christians will just keep quiet and not preach the gospel, but whatever the case, unbelievers are, in general, determined to block the spread of the gospel and the conversion of more people to the truth.

- Sometimes it is our family and friends. Sometimes it is our neighbors. They do not like the message of the gospel. It makes them feel unworthy of heaven or it threatens their own religion.
- Sometimes it is our government. They feel threatened by our giving supreme allegiance to someone other than them. They are afraid if too many people believe, it will result in their loss of power.
- Sometimes it is other religious people. They feel their god's honor is threatened (Acts 19:28), or perhaps, as in the case of Demetrius, they feel their livelihood is threatened (Acts 19:23ff).
- Sometimes it is even some who profess to believe the truth. This has been a problem

throughout history. Cain offered a sacrifice and talked with God, and hence he appeared to be a religious-minded man. And yet, he killed his brother Abel. Jesus said in John 16:2 that some who profess to believe will even kill true believers.

But whatever, unbelievers will often rise up and try to hinder us from sharing the gospel. What should we do in such cases?

As we see in the case of the apostles, we should both be respectful to human authorities and submit first to God. On the one hand, as Peter wrote in 1 Peter 2:17, we should honor those in authority, and as Paul noted in 1 Timothy 2:1-2, we should even pray for them. However, on the other hand, we should always honor God above all others and show our supreme allegiance to Him by obeying Him above all others. This means that when we are pressed by unbelievers to stop evangelizing, we cannot acquiesce. We must not be belligerent, to be sure, but we must not surrender to their will over God's. In Acts 5 we read that Peter and John knew they had a responsibility first to obey God rather than man, and since God had commanded His church to preach the gospel to the ends of the earth, they could not obey the authorities and stop evangelizing.

Because of this, we must prepare ourselves for opposition from the world.

- Since they hate the light and love darkness,
- since they are enemies of God and children of the devil,
- since they are slaves to sin and disinclined from righteousness,

...they will not respond favorably to the gospel unless the Holy Spirit works in them. It is their natural inclination to reject the gospel and express hostility towards those who preach it.

How then should we prepare? We must do as was noted above concerning the fear of man.

Remember the words of Jesus: “<sup>28</sup> And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. <sup>29</sup> Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. <sup>30</sup> But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. <sup>31</sup> Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows. <sup>32</sup> So everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven, <sup>33</sup> but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven. (Matthew 10:28-33) Brethren, do not allow a fear of man to so control you that it leads to the ruin of your soul.

While we often think of the opposition of the world as great, there is a far greater opponent who seeks relentlessly to obstruct our work of evangelism.

## II. The Works of the Devil

In 2 Corinthians 4:3-4 we read: “And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled only to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.” When we preach the gospel to the lost, there are things happening that the human eye cannot see. And one of those things is the devil is seeking to keep a veil over the eyes of the people we are sharing with so that they cannot see the glory of Christ and His work in the gospel, and believe and be saved. Instead, because of the devil's blinding work, they view the gospel as nonsense. It sounds like some myth or human-made story to them, and so they reject it.

What does it mean that the devil has “blinded their eyes”? On the one hand, it does **not** negate the fact that unbelievers are already blind because of their fallen nature. They cannot see the glory of Christ in the gospel even if Satan does not blind their eyes, for due to their fallenness they are spiritually blind so as not to be able to see, not to mention predisposed by their sin not to want to see it. On the other hand, it does mean that Satan works through various means to further corrupt their minds, resulting in their having even more trouble thinking clearly and understanding the gospel. The devil exerts himself to make sure that when they hear the gospel they cannot see the truth. He uses lies like evolution to try to keep their minds unable and unwilling to believe.

In view of these things, let us make sure we spend more time in prayer about this, pleading with God to tear the veil away from the eyes of those we are evangelizing, so that they can understand and believe.

These then are the two main external obstacles we will face when seeking to evangelize the lost. We will face (1) the opposition of unbelievers and (2) the work of the evil one. And yet, in spite of this fact, God commands us to get out there and evangelize. We may not hide because of these difficulties, but must steel up our courage and in the power of the Spirit get busy doing the work to which the Lord has called us.

In this fifth section of our course, we have investigated common obstacles to the spread of the gospel. Some have been in our hearts and in the church, while others are outside ourselves and the church. Effectiveness in evangelism requires we understand these obstacles and take measures to properly deal with them. I hope we will all soberly do so.

Lord willing, in the next section we will wrap up our course.

## Section 6

### Concluding appeal

I know there is more that could be said about evangelism, but the goal of this course is not to be exhaustive, but to serve as a foundation to help us understand what we are to do and why and how, and then to provide some momentum so that we will actually get busy doing it. In other words, I want ourselves and our churches to become truly biblically reformed, and as I said at the beginning of the course, **no church is truly biblically reformed if it is not actively engaged in evangelistic activity**, for a church that fails to promote and practice evangelism fails to obey the clear teaching of the Bible on the responsibility of God's people to make evangelism a priority in the life of the church.

Before we conclude this course, there is a final appeal I would like to make concerning the matter of evangelism.

#### The true state of the matter – urgent

I fear most of us are not urgent about this matter. The plight of the lost has not really gripped our hearts, at least not to the point that we are compelled to do something about it. “Do we really need to be so urgent about this matter?” some might ask. I hope by now we are all convinced that we should be, but let me expand upon that well-known illustration mentioned previously to reinforce this point.

If we were to see a person standing in the road, sure of himself that he was safe and had nothing to fear, all the while there was a big truck coming from his backside about to run him over, what would we do?

- Would we just look at him and say, “Oh well, if it is God’s will for him to live, that truck will not hit him”?
- Would we stand there petrified in fear that he might get mad at us if we tell him to get out of the road quickly?
- Would we think to ourselves, “But you know, saving people is not my occupation. I am just a common citizen. I certainly do not have any special training for such a noble task”?

I would think most of us would say or do something. I would actually hope we would be willing to take a big risk to save his life. And yet, how much more urgent is the matter of the lost! They are heading to an eternal state of misery. They are blindly walking along the broad road that leads to destruction. And can we just stand around and watch?

Think again about the man in the road. What if, while he is standing there, you were to just turn away and begin looking at all the nice trinkets in the store on the side of the road? What if you were to receive a call from a friend who asked you to come watch a movie and you consented and left? Would you not be a cruel mongrel worthy of shame and prison? And yet, how much more do we deserve shame and God’s displeasure when we have no concern and do nothing for those who are perishing!

Furthermore, remember how miserable it is to serve such a cruel and merciless master as the devil. Think of how destructive sin is and how empty ungodliness is. This was our estate before God saved us. Is it something that you would like to return to?

Brethren, this is not a small matter. We must arise and get out to preach the gospel to the lost.

Spurgeon wrote,

I remember when I have preached at different times in the country, and sometimes here, that my whole soul has agonized over men, every nerve of my body has been strained, and I could have wept my very being out of my eyes, and carried my whole frame away in a flood of tears if I could but win souls.<sup>3</sup>

Are we honestly disappointed when weeks and months, even years pass by without any sinners being saved through our church's evangelistic efforts? Are we content that Christ's glory is not being displayed in the salvation of sinners? Walker challenges: "Does our lack of fruitfulness in the pursuit of souls make us shrug, or does it make us weep? If we can only shrug, we ought to be thoroughly ashamed and repent with tears over a most criminal hardness of heart.... If Christ cried out and wept over Jerusalem, can we not cry out and weep over our families, friends, streets, neighborhoods, towns, and cities? Can we be content to shrug our shoulders at the great need of the godless to turn from their sins and idols and to serve the living and true God?"<sup>4</sup>

Brethren, it is time for us to put aside our many excuses and put down the toys of this world that so easily distract and begin to learn to love the lost! It is time for us who call ourselves followers of Christ to imitate Christ in having compassion for the lost and seeking to save them. It is time for us to arise and go forth to every corner of the city and country, and, under the banner of our King, to proclaim His mercies to those who live in the most pitiful condition imaginable – condemned to perish and without hope. And may God bless our labors to the glory of His name and the good of many. Amen.

Final Exam:

- What has been one or two of the most helpful things you have learned in this class?
- What area have you especially grown most in the area of evangelism?
- What area do you still struggle in in the area of evangelism?
- What final questions do you have about the matter of evangelism?

Lets take a few minutes to pray, (either together or breaking into small groups).

Include in the content of your prayers

- (1) A confession of sin in any area needed in relation to evangelism.
- (2) A petition that God would give grace that we would apply what we have learned in this class to more earnestly and effectively engage in evangelism.

<sup>3</sup> Spurgeon, MTP 1898, 55; from [http://www.faithalone.org/journal/2006i/5\\_harmon.pdf](http://www.faithalone.org/journal/2006i/5_harmon.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Jeremy Walker, *The Brokenhearted Evangelist*, 132.