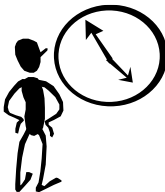


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### Time of Assembly



#### **Sunday:**

Bible Study 9:00 a.m.  
Worship 10:00 a.m.  
(Or every other week)

Bible Study 4:00 p.m.

Worship 5:00 p.m.

#### **Wednesday:**

Bible Study 7:00 p.m.

## Cookie Cutter Evangelism

By David Weeks

I often find myself wondering: "Why are brethren not baptizing more people? Why aren't the numbers of people requesting baptism (Acts 8:36) commensurate with the amount of labor that Christians spend in soul-winning?" I have found that most preachers confess the same nagging concerns.

Is successful evangelism a question of method only, or is it a question of hard, dedicated work? While I wholeheartedly believe that we who teach do well to have a plan of attack and an organized method of delivering the gospel to people, I have always been skeptical of the magical "cookie-cutter" method that is 100% effective 100% of the time, with 100% of people. Some boast that invariably, by lesson number three or four of their classes, the prospect will start looking for water and demand baptism.

However, my experience has been that I must approach an Atheist and a Baptist differently. With the Atheist, I must prove to him that there is a God before I can talk with him about the plan of salvation. The Baptist already believes in the Creator, but he knows nothing much of the authority of God, so that is what he needs to study first.

The only "method" of converting both men is to teach both the gospel of Christ. That is where the power lies (Romans 1:16). My method, no matter how dazzling and brilliant, will be gutted of any power without the gospel as its substance. If you survey the New Testament, you will find little reference to "method." The apostles and early Christians simply kept on preaching to and teaching anyone who would listen (Acts 4:19-20). They unflinchingly urged men to save themselves from this corrupt generation (Acts 2:40).

The presentation of the gospel of Christ can be accomplished in many ways. One can devise, write, and print his own study guides, and gear each lesson to impel the student

down the road to the goal of him being baptized into Christ. But there is nothing novel here. This is what gospel preachers have always done.

In the end, soul-winning has always been a long hard slog. The reality of our work is that the number and frequency of baptisms are largely out of our hands. Paul said, "*I planted, Apollos watered, and God gives the increase*" (I Corinthians 3:6). The only thing any preacher can do is preach and teach as faithfully as he can. The heart of the student will either receive the gospel or it won't.

Perhaps our effectiveness actually screeches to a halt when we stop preaching in order to hunt for the perfect "one size fits all" approach to preaching. Have we become victims of the marketing mentality of our day, in which selling sizzle over steak is what moves buyers into stores?

The conversion of precious lost souls is not a "shortcut" kind of thing. The well-prepared, patient teacher must teach and the student must be made to think about his spiritual condition and his duty to His Lord. The only thing we who preach and teach can do is labor to present the gospel in a manner that men are "cut to the heart" and ask "what must we do" (Acts 2:37)?

A hard-working, never-quit approach to soul winning is the only one I can find in the Bible. There is most certainly a long game and a short game in personal evangelism. Some people will "hear thee again on this matter" (Acts 17:32), and others will obey God "the same hour of the night" (Acts 16:33). But a one size fits all approach that is always 100% successful in 100% of cases, seems more a fantasy than a reality. Only the word of God succeeds every time (Isaiah 55:11). Our techniques can only help, but they can also hinder people's reception of truth.

Since I introduced the notion of a "cookie-cutter" method of Evangelism, please bear with me as I complete the analogy to the subject at hand. I was once a professional baker and I think this is a good comparison (I apologize in advance for comparing prospects to cookies, but it will make sense shortly). Every cookie ever baked has the same basic ingredients: flour, sugar, salt, eggs, butter, or shortening, as well as a leavening agent. Ideally, every single batch of cookies should always come out perfectly if baked in the same oven. But they just don't. One batch of cookies will be perfect, and another batch that you bake two hours later following the same recipe and techniques will fall flat. How is this possible? By comparison, the work of converting a sinner's heart involves the same set of variables. People are mostly the same, but their differences make all the difference in the outcome of a Bible study. How people receive and process information is often very different from person to person. Each person's knowledge, personality, temperament, bias, ambitions, goals, loves, affections, fears, religious training, and interests can affect the outcome of a Bible study.

Here is how the cookie crumbles: Although every cookie you bake is made up of fundamentally the same materials, the subtle differences in all of those materials will

definitely affect how your cookies turn out. If your baking powder is too old, your cookies will not rise properly and will be little thin puddles of grease. If you use bread flour rather than AP flour, your cookies will be good for masonry, not eating. If you use the wrong kind of fat, expect crumbs, not cookies. If your butter has too high or low a water content, your cookies will bite the dust. Even the humidity inside of the bakery at different times of the day will make bad cookies from a great recipe. Then there is the oven; the temperature can fluctuate a few degrees up and down without you realizing it so that one pan of cookies will be great, but the next one will flop.

Like cookie dough, the hearts of men and women are different from "batch to batch." A convert to Jesus Christ is made when one hears the gospel and believes it (John 8:24; Romans 10:14-17), repents of his sins (Acts 17:30), confesses his faith (Acts 10:9-10), and is baptized into Christ (Acts 2:38). When exposed to the crucible of the gospel, people respond differently. Not everyone's attention and appetite for spiritual things are the same. The Ethiopian eunuch was ready to be baptized as soon as he found a pool of water in which he could be immersed (Acts 8:36-37), but King Agrippa, while admitting his understanding of the gospel, was never baptized so far as we know (Acts 26:28). Was there something special about the method that Philip used with the eunuch that Paul failed to provide to Agrippa? No, both men preached the same gospel (Acts 8:35). Surely, Paul, who was inspired by God, and zealous, had the perfect "approach" (II Peter 1:20-21). Yet, he could not get the king into the water.

We who preach and teach the gospel are always looking for what works in reaching the heart of every person. This requires patience, flexibility, and the ability to properly analyze the knowledge and spiritual appetite of the people we are trying to convert. It also requires a thick skin and an ability to endure the disappointment. The gospel will convert a few here and there, and more than a few will never allow themselves to be changed by the gospel. Those who are eventually converted may need to "bake" a little longer than others before they are ready.

The one constant in our work is the gospel. It alone has the power to save, and it never changes by a single degree. The gospel is always the same for everyone, and it will always succeed in converting the good and honest heart (Acts 10:34-35).

Perhaps this business of personal evangelism is less a question of methodology than it is of good, old-fashioned, grinding work. More than one method can work, but only if it is the gospel that is taught. If you hit on a series of class notes that seem to produce good results, keep at it, but when it stops being as effective, try something else. In the meantime, keep busy educating yourself on the truth. Fan the fire of faith in your own heart. Never let an opportunity to teach someone pass you by. Quit praying for an "open door" big enough to sail the Queen Mary through (Colossians 4:3) when a small crack in the door to slide a tract to a lost soul may be enough to get the ball rolling. Just keep working, praying, and teaching. Put your faith in the message of hope and salva-

tion, not in your ability to dazzle people into the water. Let us not grow weary while doing good (Galatians 6:9).

## Praying for the Dead

By Wayne Jackson

Whenever someone we love dies — in old age or tragically before their prime — our hearts cannot but anguish with those who are suffering soul-tearing losses.

Some children have lost one or both parents. Husbands and wives have been robbed of loving mates. Others will never see their brother or sister again.

To describe separations like these as painful is an egregious understatement. The caring soul is wholly sympathetic to the tears of hurting family members.

It is most difficult to be critical of sincere people in a time of such distress. But we must, with genuine compassion, call attention to a glaring error that has manifested itself repeatedly — and occasionally on the part of Christians who ought to know better. Not infrequently the public has been encouraged to “pray for those whose lives were lost, and for their families.”

For those grieving families — yes. Certainly. For the dead? No.

Is this a heartless admonition? It is not. It is a spiritual reality. No one should entertain the illusion that someone may be able to pray for him, effecting some beneficial result, after he is dead.

### Praying for the Dead

While it is natural to have the inclination to pray in times of acute distress, the only thing we really know about valid prayer is that which is revealed in the Bible. The scriptures constitute the only legitimate prayer manual.

And there is ample evidence in the sacred volume that prayers for the dead are not only futile but that the practice is antagonistic to certain aspects of divine truth — in spite of the fact that this pagan practice is common in certain circles of “Christendom.” For example, Roman Catholic theology allows for prayers both to the dead and on behalf of them. But reflect upon the following points.

#### Admission: No Biblical Authority

Even Catholic authorities concede that there is no explicit authorization for prayers on behalf of the dead in the 66 books of the canonical scripture. Roman authorities appeal to the Apocrypha (II Maccabees 12:46), church tradition (the second century and onward), the decree of the Council of Trent (Session xxv), etc.

But there is no valid biblical defense to be made for the practice (Attwater, 127). It is from a few passages, not relevant to the issue, that those unwarranted inferences are drawn.

#### No Need to Pray for the Righteous Dead

The Scriptures teach that those who have yielded to the Savior’s will (Hebrews

5:8-9) enter directly and immediately into the presence of the Lord (Luke 23:43; Philippians 1:23; II Corinthians 5:6, 8).

What need, then, do they have for the prayers of people upon the earth?

### **Death Ends the Opportunity to Prepare**

In the parable of the virgins (Matthew 25:1ff), there is the clear lesson that after those virgins went to sleep — signifying death (cf. Daniel 12:2; I Thessalonians 4:13ff) — there was no further opportunity for preparation (the “door was shut” (Matthew 25:10)).

The lesson then is taught that only those who had made adequate personal preparation would meet the bridegroom in a prepared state.

The implications of this illustration are firmly opposed to the notion of praying for the dead.

### **Death Involves a Permanent Separation**

When Jesus related the details regarding the selfish rich man and the righteous beggar Lazarus, he affirmed that a “great gulf” stood between the abode of the unrighteous and the righteous (Luke 16:19ff).

Jesus stated that this gulf is permanently fixed (this is the force of the perfect tense verb), and there is no crossing from one side to the other. How, therefore, could prayers from the living alter the destiny of the lost?

### **Death Initiates One's Final Judgment**

According to Hebrews 9:27, “*It is appointed to men once to die, and after this comes judgment.*” There is no indication that a change in one’s spiritual condition can be made following his death — either by himself or through the efforts of others.

### **Prayer Is Useless for Those Who Die in Rebellion**

The apostle John prohibited prayer for those who are committing “*sin unto death*” (I John 5:16). Who are these? Those who are in constant rebellion, living in sin without seeking relief in conformity to God’s law of pardon.

If such is the case with the living who are in persistent rebellion, how could praying for those who are dead already do any good since there is no post-mortem plan of salvation?

### **Conclusion**

And so, while we truly sympathize with those who have lost dear ones, we would do well to be reminded of the biblical admonition: “*Behold, now is the acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation*” (II Corinthians 6:2).

While this language, in contrast, refers to the gospel age as a whole, the phraseology is not inappropriate for the individual who, in an unprepared condition, faces the inevitable enemy — death (Romans 5:12; I Corinthians 5:26; Hebrews 9:27).

**Works Cited:** Attwater, Donald. 1961. *A Catholic Dictionary*. New York: Macmillan.

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# What About the Next Sunday?

By Terry Wane Benton

Some people meet with the church on “Easter Sunday” and hardly ever anytime else. That is out of tradition, not out of thinking seriously about doing the will of God. Tradition has been in the family to at least go to church one time a year, maybe two. But what about the next Sunday? Easter is not biblical in name and meeting on that one Sunday is not biblical. Tradition makes it try to coincide with that time of year Jesus was raised from the dead, but the apostles of Jesus taught and practiced an **every**-Sunday-meeting manner of faith-life.

The time of Jesus’ death was during the Jewish Passover, which was followed by a week of “Days of Unleavened Bread” (See Exodus 12). That was a yearly celebration of the Jew’s deliverance from Egyptian bondage by breaking Pharaoh’s will to keep his hold on the Israelites. The death of his firstborn broke him after nine other plagues had only hardened him. The death plague “passed over” the Israelites who had the blood of the lamb on their house door facings but killed the firstborn of all Egyptians because they did not have the blood of the lamb on their door facings. The Israelites removed all leaven from their houses as a symbol of leaving the sinful influences of that idol-ridden territory. So, the deliverance from Egypt was a remarkable deliverance that typified and foreshadowed the greater deliverance from sin that we would have in the coming Messiah. Jesus is our Passover (I Corinthians 5:7) Lamb of God who delivers us from bondage to sin and condemnation, and His resurrection on that Sunday morning confirms that He has power over death. Having power over death, His blood has power over sin and Satan’s power to hold us in bondage to sin and condemnation, delivers us from fear of death, and from the power of sin to hold us under condemnation. Indeed, we have the greater deliverance available to us in Christ.

But did you know that the early disciples did not celebrate this deliverance yearly but weekly? Pentecost was fifty days after Passover, and the church formed and took the breaking of bread of the Lord’s Supper (Acts 2:42). Pentecost fell on Sunday, but it was over a month after Passover (what people call “Easter” today). They not only were meeting together over a month after Passover, but they were doing this “continually” and “steadfastly” (Acts 2:42). In Acts 20:6 we see Paul “**after** the Days of Unleavened Bread” (which was part of the yearly “Passover” week) meeting with the brethren at Troas. “*On the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread*” (Acts 20:7) declares the Christians were meeting each week even after the Passover week. You should notice that the disciples of Jesus did not merely meet on the Sunday of Passover week, but every week. They did not have a yearly tradition, but a weekly practice. They took the bread of the Lord’s supper every first day of the week. So, what about the next Sunday? They were doing the will of God in their practice of the weekly meeting for the Lord’s Supper. They did not mimic the Jews’ yearly Passover feast. They celebrated each week the memorial of the greater work of Jesus.

What will you be doing the next Sunday and next? A tradition of men or the will of God?