

October 24, 2010

Matthew 4:18-20 / Acts 20:17-24 / Philemon 1:4-6 / Acts 1:1-8
 Pursuing and Embracing a Vision of Church Health (#6) - Sharing the Hope-filled Message That God Is and God Cares

Today we come to the **FIFTH LINK** in our **Chain of Church Health** - the link called **EVANGELISM**. And like all the other links I've spoken about, this one is also such a broad and expansive topic that it's a bit presumptuous to even think one could ever cover it well in just one message!

Yet my hope is that you would see the indispensable importance of each link to the strength of the chain, and then go out on your own, and read and contemplate and meditate and dialogue with each other on how we can shore up or strengthen each one in the church.

So, without any further delay, let me speak on the topic of EVANGELISM. And in doing so, as with last week, I'm going to focus PRIMARILY on one particular text as I do -- actually, one particular verse -- Acts 1:8.

And what I hope to show you is: What evangelism is / how close it is to the heart and purposes of God / how one does it or what it consists of / and what it will require of us or cost us to do it.

So, **FIRST** (with your Bible's open in front of you) let's look at what I mean when I use the word evangelism -- acknowledging from the start that the word "evangelism" (like the words Trinity and others) doesn't even appear in the New Testament! You won't find it!

What you will instead find is the word it comes from -- the word "evangelist" -- which appears in Acts 21:8 where we read: "***We stayed in the house of Phillip, the evangelist...***" / Eph. 4:11 where we read: "***He gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets and some to be evangelists...***" and II Tim. 4:5 where we read: "***Endure hardship, and do the work of an evangelist...***"

Where does the English word "evangelist" and the corresponding derivative "evangelism" come from? From the Greek word "*euangellion*" or "the evangel" which simply means "the Gospel"!

Therefore, defining it in its most basic sense, we could say this: ***The "evangel" is the Gospel. / An "evangelical" is one who believes the "Gospel." / An "evangelist" is one who not only believes it but is gifted by God with a passion to share it with others (and see THEM come to believe it as well)! / And "evangelism" is what we call the activity of sharing the Gospel with others. / It's that simple!***

In fact, since the Gospel is "Good News" the Bible assumes that anyone who truly believes it will WANT to share it with others -- even if they haven't been blessed with the particular "spiritual gifting" which Scripture calls the "gift of an evangelist."

And I say that because in my 24 years as a pastor, I've heard numerous people (who didn't feel the need to do evangelism) say to me: "I'd do it, but I don't have the gift."

Some have even taken me to Eph. 4:11 which does distinctly imply that "evangelism" is what a person given a special ability from God in regard to sharing the Gospel with others, does. "There," they'll say, "you see? 'God gave SOME to be evangelists...' It's a gift. Evangelism is something that people with the gift of an evangelist do."

And obviously that's true! A person with the gift of an evangelist finds it nearly impossible NOT to do evangelism. They feel a deep inner yearning and unquenchable desire to do so!

People like George Whitefield, John Wesley, D. L. Moody, Billy Graham, Luis Palau and slews of others throughout history -- including millions of individuals who have dedicated themselves to doing evangelism without ever becoming well-known for it outside their own town or local church.

Yet, these same people often overlook the last verse in II Tim. 4:5, where Paul says to Timothy (who appears to have been one who did NOT have the gift of an evangelist): ***"Do the WORK of an evangelist."*** It was a distinction pointed out to me by John Guest, who is himself a gifted evangelist!

You'll notice Paul did not say to Timothy: "Exercise the gift you have." He says, "Do the work (ie: that someone who had the gift would do)" Why? Because most likely there was no one in that vicinity with the gift!

Churches were small and sparse in those early days, and the areas they were in were largely unevangelized. And thus someone had to do the work an evangelist would do, even if they didn't have the gift!

Because no church can be healthy and grow, unless someone is doing the type of work an evangelist would do! Gift or not someone has to do it! It's not optional!

It may not get done as well as someone with the gift would do it or with as much confidence and enthusiasm as someone with the gift. / We may not be as successful at it as someone with the gift or see as much fruit from our labors. / But if no one else is doing it we must step up and stand in the gap and at least try -- because if no one plants seeds there can be no harvest!

And if there is no harvest of unbelievers won to faith in Christ through the sharing of the Gospel, then any given church will eventually die! (As has happened to so many churches in America that it's sad to recount.)

According to the latest statistics, nearly 3500-4000 churches a year are closing their doors for good in America (in 1986 it was 2000/yr). And many of them have had to close their doors simply because the people in them refused to make evangelism a priority!

Surely most of them (as they started to die) sought to attract or bring in new members. But there's an ENORMOUS CHASM OF DIFFERENCE between simply trying to attract new members (most frequently meaning Christians in their area who haven't yet found a church home) and seeking to win non-Christians to Christ -- which IS what EVANGELISM is all about!

We must always remember there is a huge difference between reaching out to unbelievers with the Gospel / and simply seeking to get believers to change the place where they choose to congregate or belong.

And LISTEN: There's nothing wrong with Christians switching churches. In our mobile society where people move every 5-7 years, it's bound to happen. But that should never be confused with evangelism, which seeks to reach the unbelieving.

So when you hear me use the word "evangelism" this morning, I want you to know I use it in the first sense - exclusively! Evangelism is the work of sharing the Gospel with non-believers. / It's seeking to win people who are NOT already IN Christ, TO Christ. / It's reaching out to seek and save the lost!

To use Jesus imagery in Mt. 4:19: We're called to throw our nets into the sea we call "the world" and be "fishers of men." We are not simply to transfer the catch (or the already caught!) from the hold in one boat to the hold in another boat (which is, sadly enough, what some consider evangelism).

Seriously! Much of what is considered modern day evangelism is one boat pulling up close to another boat, and handing off baskets of fish they've previously caught to the owners of the other boat!

Whereas Jesus' call is to lower the net of the Gospel deep into the waters of the world and catch new fish -- always new fresh fish! Any fisherman would have understood that!

Or to use Jesus imagery in John chapter 10: Evangelism is not going to a neighboring field and seeking to lure sheep from their pasture to our pasture (on the basis that the grass in our pasture is somehow greener)!

Evangelism is sharing the life-transforming truth of the Gospel, so that the not-yet-sheep, or the sheep not yet brought into any fold, might come in, or come to be sheep in the first place!

Then **SECONDLY**, we need to consider - How close evangelism is to the heart and purposes of God! And here all we need to do is narrow it down to one book and one passage from that book and one verse from that passage -- Acts 1:8. Because there we read (in regard to the promise of the Holy Spirit to be poured out on Pentecost): ***"And you shall receive power, when the Holy Spirit***

comes upon you, and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and Judea, and Samaria, and unto the uttermost parts of the earth."

And you know what? The rest of the book of Acts is nothing an historical account of that divine injunction being carried out! It's the record of those 120 disciples receiving that gift (and the power for witness that came with it) and then doing exactly what Jesus called them to do once they received it -- be witnesses for Him in Jerusalem and beyond.

Yet I hope you caught the main point of the verse where Jesus tells them: God is going to pour out His Holy Spirit upon you (the "gift the Father promised" in Isaiah 32:14, Ezekiel 36:26-27, and Joel 2:28-29). But He wants them to KNOW before they ever receive it, that this gift is being given to them with a very specific, definitive, explicitly stated purpose in mind -- one so close to the heart of God that Jesus can't let it go unmentioned!

What is it? It's the fact that this gift is not being given to simply make them feel good / or give them a memorable mystical experience / or give them power to carry out their own dreams and do the things they want to do or accomplish in life. / It's being given to them so that they may have the POWER TO DO THE ONE THING GOD WANTS MORE THAN ALL ELSE -- reach the lost and the unbelieving with the Gospel message -- which He knows will often be met with intense resistance and require His power!

Jesus is very specific: ***"You shall receive power, when the Holy Spirit comes upon you..." Power for what? He tells them: "and YOU SHALL BE MY WITNESSES..."***

According to Jesus the primary reason the Holy Spirit is given to us for the express purpose of empowering us to be witnesses for Him! It's primarily a Spirit of power for evangelism! That's confirmed on Pentecost, when as soon as they receive the Holy Spirit they boldly head out to the streets in Jerusalem and start: "declaring the wonders of God in the languages of all present." (2:11)

Peter (the same Peter who cowered in fear of the Jews and denied Jesus) now stands in some high prominent place in the Temple area, where thousands of

Jews had gathered on Pentecost (the day the Jews set aside to celebrate the giving of the Law to Moses on Mt. Sinai) and he boldly preaches the death and resurrection of Jesus and calls them to repent and turn from their sin and be baptized in Jesus name! (and 3000 respond)!

And again in chapter 4, after Peter and John are arrested for healing a man and speaking of Jesus in the Temple courts, and released, they prayed fervently, and **"the room where they meeting was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit..."** And what happened as a result of this new filling with the Spirit? **"They... spoke the word of God boldly."** (Affirming once again, that the Holy Spirit is given to us primarily to empower us for the task of doing evangelism!)

In fact, when one considers that the Spirit is given to us to empower us to be witnesses and every time the disciples are filled with the Spirit that's the first thing they do, it would seem to follow: That if we have no inner desire to see others come to Christ / and feel no inner prompting to ever share the Gospel / and have no passion nor even an occasional urge to witness or do evangelism / we must seriously question if we have ever received the Holy Spirit whose express purpose (according to Jesus) is to give us power to be His witnesses!

And I'm not saying everyone needs to be a Billy Graham, or do door-to-door evangelism. That's not at all what I'm saying! But I am very unapologetically saying this: If a person has no desire to see others saved / or see unbelievers born of the Spirit from above / they need to seriously question if they have ever been born of the Spirit or become Christians yet themselves.

Because according to Jesus those who have come to Him by faith, have received the Holy Spirit, and that Holy Spirit (if Jesus is right) will give to us both the desire and the power to be witnesses for Him! THAT'S one of His primary tasks in the lives of the saved! Is it there in you? Is it?

Then **THIRDLY** what does it mean to do evangelism or be His witnesses? How does one do that and what exactly does it consist of? And my answer is this: It consists of witnessing to others in BOTH word and deed. Not one or the other, but always BOTH -- done in the appropriate way and at the appropriate time.

If we live a life that is contrary to the message we speak, then we negate by our actions the very words that we want them to believe. And if we live a very godly life, but never verbally share the truths of the Gospel, which they must believe in order to be saved, we leave them one step short of salvation.

Because "Salvation," as we're told in Eph:2:8-9, "**comes by grace, through FAITH in Jesus Christ.**" And FAITH, as Paul tells us in Romans 10:17, "**comes by hearing, and the message is heard through the word of Christ (or the shared Gospel).**" People are saved, says Paul in II Thess. 2:13, "**through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and belief in the truth.**"

Yet, this is where I have gotten into many a lengthy discussion with many Christian people who think it is enough to simply live out a godly life in front of others, so they will be drawn to Christ through our example.

And I don't deny the need to live out a godly, loving, gracious life before others. "**Apart from the word of God,**" said one Puritan, "**there is no more powerful influence in the hands of God than a holy life or a life well-lived.**"

Yet a well-lived life doesn't always testify to Jesus or the Gospel. Because there are many people who live moral, upright, ethical, kind and gracious lives who are not Christian in the least! My father and grandfather and Nancy's grandfather lived more blameless and morally upright lives than most Christians I've known! Like Thomas Jefferson, they all saw the value of religion, but were adamantly anti-evangelical (or anti-Gospel).

I never met a man more generous than Nancy's grandfather. But on one occasion, when we shared the Gospel with him, he firmly rebuked us and said (and I quote): "**It doesn't matter what you believe. You could worship a pencil for all it matters, as long as you worship something.**"

He was a happy and gracious unbeliever and made no bones about it. Which is why, to this day, I so appreciate and can remember as if it were yesterday, the skit a couple from the mid-west did in the church I attended in the Dominican Republic, during my two year missionary service there.

The skit went like this: They put up a little white picket fence to divide the altar area, and the husband pretended he was mowing his lawn -- back and forth he went, smiling and waving and pushing his lawn mower -- while one of the students played the part of his unbelieving neighbor was also out mowing his lawn.

And the whole skit revolved around the neighbor trying to figure out why this guy was so happy, smiling and waving -- because he never said anything! So the neighbor wondered -- was he simply being neighborly, or friendly? Was he making fun of Him, or did he want something, or was secretly hoping to get something from him?

And the skit ended with him being condemned by God on the Day of Judgment, because the message he got from his neighbor was simply that being a Christian consisted of nothing more than being nice and happy and friendly.

It doesn't of course! But that is what we can lead people to believe when we seek to witness by our actions alone. Thus it's good to remember that after Jesus tells the disciples that the Spirit will give them power to be His witnesses, we find that though it surely included living godly lives, it was primarily accomplished by what they said or shared.

They were persecuted and arrested and warned, says Luke, ***"not to SPEAK or TEACH at all in the name of Jesus."*** Or as one version puts it, ***"not to testify any longer in the name of Jesus."*** Because that's what witnesses do -- they testify or give verbal testimony to what they know or have seen, like a witness on the witness stand in a court of law!

And when they prayed, their request was: ***"Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to SPEAK YOUR WORD with great boldness."***

The power they prayed for was the power to witness verbally. Because no one really minds if you're nice and you say nothing! They only begin to mind when you share the truth of the gospel and they come under conviction for their sin or unbelief as the Spirit works in conjunction with the spoken word.

Which brings us to the **LAST** thing we need to consider: What it will require of us or cost us to do it. You see, the word "witnesses" in verse 8, which the Spirit is given to empower us to be, is the Greek word "*martures*." It's the word we get our English word "martyr" from. The Greek word for martyr, and the Greek word for witness come from the same root.

And appropriately so, because witnessing for Christ often cost people their lives -- as with Stephen in Acts chapter 7, or James the brother of John in Acts chapter 12.

In fact, Antipas, who was martyred for the faith in the city of Pergamum, some time before 95 A.D., is called by Jesus, in Rev. 2:13: "***My faithful witness,***" or as we could put it, "***My faithful martyr.***"

And what's the point? Why use that term? ***Because Jesus apparently wanted them to know that being witnesses for Him will ALWAYS cost us something and SOMETIMES cost us everything!***

You can't do evangelism without it "costing" you something! Time that could have been spent doing something else / loss of respect or esteem in the eyes of some unbelievers you share with / or rejection by friends who avoid you after you tell them you're a Christian or share about Jesus.

In some places today it could even cost you your job / or a reprimand / people thinking you're naive. / It could even cost you the vandalism of your car, house or property -- (Ellie Karlsson)

So my question today is this: Are you willing to accept the inevitable cost of being a witness for Jesus?

Joe Darrow made a good point last Sunday after the service when he told me people he's talked to are often afraid to witness or disciple, not simply because they don't know enough, or don't have enough confidence (two things which I had alluded to in my sermon) but because once they share the Gospel people put their lives under a microscope!

You can get away with messing up, and being normal, and almost invisible, and fly under the radar of people's scrutiny, so long as you mind your own business and don't witness. But once you share the Gospel they look hard and long to find in you every reason not to believe what you share!

Yet isn't that also part of the cost we must pay? Isn't that part of what Jesus and Paul both imply we should expect? "Endure hardship and do the work of an evangelist." (Because if you do it you will have to endure hardship!)

In May I preached a sermon where I challenged everyone to share the Gospel with just one person in the next week or two and at best only 25% of you said you would. It took me by surprise.

And by that I didn't mean share the whole Gospel (which may account for the low percentage)! I simply meant some small part of it -- a seed of Gospel truth (to use Jesus illustration in Matt. 13 of the Sower sowing his seeds).

Today I'm not going to do that -- at least not with a raise of hands. I'm simply going ask God to prompt us to do so -- for the sake of the Church He loves.

Over 3500 churches are closing their doors every year in America because Christians have failed to make evangelism a priority.

Don't let that be true of us.