

October 31, 2010

Acts 22:1-16 / Philemon 1:4-7 / Ephesians 2:1-10

Pursuing and Embracing a Vision for Church Health (#7) - Getting Started in Evangelism

After the service last Sunday I realized that I had done everyone a great disservice -- because I had encouraged all of you to go out and do evangelism, making it both a priority in your own personal life and in our church -- yet I didn't tell you how to go about doing it!

It's sort of like telling everyone they need to replace an electrical outlet or light switch on their wall. It's something ANYONE can easily do with a screwdriver and needle nose pliers -- if someone merely shows them how! (Just shut off the power first!)

And that's the key! Many things we pay people good money to do or think only a trained professional could do, we discover to be ridiculously simple once we see them do it!

(As many a home owner has found out the hard way after they pay a plumber or electrician \$70 to \$100 for a house visit, only to watch him flick a switch or tighten a loose screw or reconnect a simple little hook on a chain that fell off in the toilet bowl!)

And the same is true of evangelism. It's something ANYONE can do once they know how / and are able to move past their initial fears of doing it / or fears of doing it wrong / or concerns that people may respond badly. Something I can say from experience -- never completely goes away!

Even as I went to the parade in Quakertown last Sunday afternoon I initially felt all those feelings rise up in me again. Possibly a hangover from my days in New England where I had one gentleman yell at me and slam the door in my face after I asked him what he felt the purpose of life was?

Most of the people I share with are very gracious and very willing to listen and dialogue (as I found refreshingly true again last Sunday)! Yet it's the vivid memories of those who weren't that always seem to get lodged in the mind and make you hesitant!

Thus, one of the things that has been a help to me on countless occasions, when dealing with those feelings, are the wise words of Martin Luther. Because whenever FEARS make me think of backing down from doing something I know I should do I simply recall his wise words.

In regard to how he could possibly have been so "fearless" / or do what he did at the time of the Reformation (risking the possibility of being burned at the stake as a heretic for what he did) -- he responded in blunt honesty that he was not at all without fears. In fact, at some points he was nearly paralyzed by fear!

Yet what he came to realize was this: ***"Courage (or bravery) is not the absence of fear; it's the determined refusal to allow our fears rule over us and thereby dictate what we will do or will not do."*** I believe he's right.

Brave and courageous people are NOT people who have no fears. They're people who REFUSE to let those fears rule over them / and drive them into inactivity / or drive them back into hiding / and thus succeed in keeping them from doing the things they know they should do.

And the last thing we should ever want, is to get to the end of our lives and have to look back with deep regrets and say: " I should have or I would have / done such and such for the Lord (or at least tried to), except that my fears always held me back from doing so."

And that's especially true when we consider (as we saw from Acts 1:8 last week) that the Holy Spirit (whom all true believers possess) has been given to us primarily to empower us to be His witnesses. To give us the courage and boldness we need to do evangelism.

Which means that in regard to doing evangelism, NO BELIEVER can ever say: "I don't have what it takes." For if we possess the Holy Spirit, who is a Spirit of power for witness, we have what it takes!

So today, let me share with you some helpful insights that we find in Scripture itself, in relation to doing evangelism, beginning **FIRST** with our passage in Philemon. Philemon is the name of the man who owned the house in which the church in Colosse met.

The NT letter to the Colossians was written to the group of people (or the church) that met in Philemon's house. And most likely he was the pastor of that small flock of believers.

And to him personally Paul writes and says: ***"I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith, SO THAT you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ."***

Notice, he DOES NOT say: ***"Be active in sharing your faith so that others may come to know Christ..."*** -- though that is, without question, one of our primary reasons for sharing it. Rather, he says, ***"So that YOU (the one sharing your faith with others or the one doing the evangelism) may have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ."***

That's the first thing I want you to see. Doing evangelism doesn't simply benefit the people you share with, it also benefits YOU! YOU grow in your knowledge and understanding of all that Christ did for YOU when YOU share your faith with others! / Doing evangelism matures YOU! / It changes YOU! / It's part of what ripens the Fruit of the Spirit in YOU!

In fact, given what Paul says here, it would only follow that at least in part, the general lack of health and lack of theological depth in the American church stems from the fact that evangelism has held such a low place of priority for so many years now.

And not just today. Even when I was in a seminary (back in the 80's), we had a special seminar dealing with evangelism and one dealing with self-esteem issues on the same evening. The one on evangelism had less than 40 people and the one on self-esteem issues had 200 or more!

Yet (I believe) that of the two, Paul would say that the practice of sharing our faith with others is far more necessary to our spiritual health and growth than any seminar on self-esteem issues. And I say that knowing full well that it goes entirely against the grain of our culture (even in many churches).

Because its sharing our faith, according to Paul, that helps us to grasp and understand and appreciate all the good things we have in Christ!

It serves to both inform us and remind us of the abundance of grace we've received from God. It helps remind us continually that our purpose in life is to live for things beyond this life! I can forget that when I cease doing evangelism. That my purpose in life is all tied up in Jesus' desire that the Gospel of His grace to be preached **"in His name, to all nations."** (Lk. 24:47)

Doing evangelism helps us move beyond our fears and anxieties and become more bold and confident and assertive and intentional and secure in our faith and grounded in who we are as grace-purchased children of God! That is, it helps our self-esteem issues MORE than any seminars on self-esteem could ever do!

And by helping us to gain a "full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ" it makes us more thankful for God's mercy, and our salvation, and thus more apt to share our faith with others and more adept at doing so when we do!

Then **SECONDLY** turn to Acts 21. There Paul gives us **THREE** things that are extremely helpful to any evangelistic outreach as he shares the Gospel (or does evangelism) with both Jews and Gentiles in Jerusalem.

The **FIRST** insight from that passage comes to us in verse 37 where he gives us what I personally have found to be one of the **MOST IMPORTANT** initial element in any situation where we share our faith. There Paul asks the Roman commander: **"May I say something to you?"** That is, **"May I have your permission to share something with you?"** (And it's true that he's a prisoner, but he still could have been defiant and just blurted it out.)

It's something we see again in v. 39 where he says, **"Please let me speak to the people."** And only after he gets the OK do we read in v. 40: **"Having received the commanders PERMISSION, Paul stood on the steps and motioned to the crowd and when they were silent he began to speak."**

It's something every Christian needs to take to heart. Because Paul's approach shows us that doing evangelism demands that we be respectful and courteous and gracious to the people we hope to share with! When the Bible tells us that the apostles spoke "boldly," it doesn't mean they did so without regard for common courtesy. Boldness is not rudeness!

It's not running roughshod over people and their feelings and simply saying what we want to say with a total disregard for them as people! Paul was obviously bold and strong and courageous, but he was not rude!

And we must always aim to be like him - bold and confident but never rude! We must treat people with dignity and honor and common courtesy, because our goal is to have them listen and truly hear the message we have to share. Which means we need to remove every unnecessary barrier to the Gospel. And asking people's permission to share with them is one of the easiest ways to remove one of those needless obstacles!

I don't think I've EVER broached the topic of the Gospel with another person (be it on a plane or in their home or even in the church office) where I didn't first ask what Paul asks the commander in v. 37: ***"Is it ok if I share some-thing with you?"***

And then I WAIT for their permission to speak about it, just as Paul did -- willing and content that their answer may be "no." And that's ok. I never force the Gospel on people who aren't ready to hear it or speak about it. Because in my opinion that often does more harm than good.

One of the first pastors I had (after I came to Christ) would always say:
"Change a man against his will; the same opinion he'll have still (even if outwardly he seems to have adopted yours)!"

"People," he would often say, ***"are like cats when it comes to water. Put a bowl of water in front of a cat and then try to force it to drink, and they'll merely dig in their feet, get their backs up and probably take a swipe at you as well!"***

Which means that doing evangelism requires that we be sensitive to the fact that some people may not be ready or able or willing (at that time) to hear what we have to say.

And I know the old saying: "What if they were to die tonight?" I'm sure that on some rare occasions that may be true! Opportunities have slipped by.

But for the most part I've seen just the opposite:

I've seen people hardened against the Gospel because they were rushed to make a profession of faith / or pressured to make an immediate decision / or persuaded by a convincing person to get down on their knees and pray the sinners prayer / long before God had made the soil of their heart ready to receive the seed / or long before the seeds of the Gospel had time to sink into the soil of their hearts and germinate.

Then **SECONDLY**, we read in Acts 22:1 that "**Paul spoke to them in Aramaic.**" He didn't have to. Everyone there would have known and spoken Greek. And with the Roman commander (in verses 37-40 of chapter 21) that's surely what he did speak.

But because he knew that his audience primarily consisted of Jews who in religious things spoke Aramaic, he wanted to meet them on some common ground. And it worked! For we read in v. 2: "**When they heard him speak to them in Aramaic, they became very quiet.**"

That is, because he spoke in Aramaic, the Jews were at least willing to give him a listening ear. And when we do evangelism, we must copy Paul in his wisdom! We must look for points of common ground between us and the people we want to share with and build upon those.

We must build bridges that connect us with others and not look for points of difference or places that we disagree, and then go after those. Because if we do the person will feel attacked, and all meaningful conversation will end.

For instance, last Sunday, I joined Nathan, and David and Brittany at the parade in Quakertown. And I spoke at length with 6 different individuals who all said they believed in God -- though as I pointed out to Nathan, their view of God was that He was, "The universe and everything in it."

That is, every one of them had a somewhat Hindu or pantheistic view of God (right here in Quakertown)! They all said they believed that "God is the universe and everything in it." (He is everything and is in everything.)

Yet, the fact they even said they believed in God was common ground to build upon! And that's what we need to do -- look for things we agree on and build upon those!

Four were not sure Jesus was any more than a man. / Only one believed in Satan. / Only one believed that God made the universe and everything in it. / And only two believed that sins or evil deeds committed in this world would be punished by God.

Yet, all of them said they would be willing to get involved in seeking after God for the purpose of having a community to belong to / strengthening family ties / investigating the supernatural realms / or understanding a spiritual experience they had -- which are all points of common ground!

In fact, after I got over my initial nervousness about how to walk up to people I did not know, at a parade, and begin speaking to them about spiritual things, it was actually quite fun and helpful and very enlightening.

Then **THIRD**, notice what Paul did in the rest of the chapter -- he shared the Gospel by sharing what God had done for him personally! That is, he shared his own personal testimony. That's what witnesses do! They testify to what God has done or is doing in their own life -- and who could argue with that?

He tells them in verse 3 that he was trained by one of the most respected Jews of his day (Gamaliel). He tells them how he had been steeped in the Old Testament and was zealous for God. He shares how he had initially persecuted Christians and arrested them and thrown them into prison and even put some of them to death because of their faith in Jesus (v. 4-6).

And then he tells them about the experience that changed his life -- how he was going to Tarsus to arrest more Christians, when around noon, a bright light flashed from heaven all around him. How he fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him: **"Saul! Saul! Why do you persecute Me?"** A voice that declared: **"I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting."**

What does he do? He tells them about his encounter with Christ! How the light blinded him / how he was told audibly by Jesus to go into the city

and wait for further instructions / how God spoke to a man named Ananias (a man highly respected by all the Jews in Damascus) and gave him both the power to heal Paul's blindness and a message to share with him -- how God had chosen him, "to be His witness to all men of what he had both seen and heard."

My friends, one of the most powerful ways to witness to others and get them focused on the reality of a living God, is to share how He has worked in your life, and changed you, and made you a different person, and broken in upon your life!

Because for most people, God is "out there somewhere." He's an impersonal God (as my survey showed). They're "closet Deists" who believe God exists, but aren't so sure He's cares about them or what they're going through -- at least not enough to do anything about it.

And what they need to know is that He not only exists and cares, but cares enough to intervene in people's lives today! In our day! Not just back then!

And one of the ways they become convinced of that is by hearing what He's done in our lives! Faith becomes nurtured through personal testimony. The Bible becomes more real to people when they realize that the God it speaks of still moves in people's lives today!

And then **THIRD**, in Romans 16 Paul is sends greetings to the people in the church at Rome. And the part we need to see are the numerous relational connections - Epenetus is Paul's dear friend (v. 5b). Andronicus and Junias are Paul's relatives (v. 7). Herodian is also his relative (v. 11). Persis is his good friend (v. 12b) and the mother of Rufus is so close to him relationally, that he can say, "she was like a mother to me too" (v. 13). Aristobulus is there and his whole household (v. 10b). Rufus is there with his mother (v. 13). And Nerus is there and his sister (v. 15).

Why do I point out all those relational connections? Because the most effective evangelism takes place within the context of already established relationships! Paul obviously shared the Gospel with his own relatives and good friends (some of whom apparently came to the Lord)!

And that's my point! I'm not a big proponent of saturation (or door to door) evangelism where we end up sharing with people who don't know us at all. I'm not opposed to it (God can surely use it) I simply believe (and studies back me up here) -- that it's the least effective of all forms of evangelism.

Go into any church, and you'll find that most of the people who are there are there (85% is studies are true) are there because a friend or relative invited them. And that's where our main efforts in evangelism should take place -- within the bounds of already established relationships!

And then **LAST**, I need to share something so basic it shouldn't need to be pointed out. It's simply this: That the focus of all our outreach and sharing and evangelistic efforts and witnessing should be the person and work of the LORD JESUS CHRIST.

In 1 Cor. 2:2 the apostle Paul said: ***"For I resolved to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified."*** / ***"For me to live is CHRIST and to die is gain,"*** he says elsewhere. ***"I count everything as rubbish,"*** he says, ***"for the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord."***
The LORD who IS "our righteousness, holiness and redemption."

In the past too much witnessing was moralistic (to the point that people were often led to believe that the way one was saved was simply by adopting conservative morality). / And today too much "evangelism" is mixed with political ideology or self-help techniques or culture laden hints on how to prosper and be successful, instead of CHRIST and faith in Him!

Just this week I got a book which says (and I believe it's true):

"The focus of the Bible is not on plans for successful living. It's not on growing large and successful churches. It's not on the family or co-dependency or self-esteem. And it is certainly not about political concerns the church needs to address prior to every national election. From Genesis to Revelation it's about CHRIST! He's the heart and soul of the entire Bible! And yet Sunday after Sunday millions of Americans hear messages aimed at resolving emotional needs or inspiring them to solve their problems... but they NEVER SEE CHRIST. They miss the CHRIST whose life, death and resurrection affect every aspect of their existence."

Yet CHRIST in all His glory should be the ultimate focus all preaching or evangelism! Because CHRIST is the greatest treasure Christianity has to offer! / You'll never find nothing more excellent, or superlative or relevant to offer to anyone! / Because HE'S the treasure of greatest worth who "if lifted up, will draw all men unto Himself." / His beauty and brilliance and the glory of His Being is what they'll be attracted by!

JESUS HIMSELF is the bread of life that "gives life to every man." / HE HIMSELF is the living water that alone can satisfy the parched and thirsty soul! / He's the ANCHOR that keeps us grounded / and the HIGH TOWER into which we can run for shelter against the foe / He's our BREASTPLATE that deflects all the fiery darts of the evil one / and the ROCK upon which we can stand to weather all the storms of life!

He's the One who captures people's attention -- CHRIST in all His magnificence and glory! Christ in the glory of His condescending love whereby He took upon Himself human form -- being born as a baby of a virgin! / Christ in His love for His Father / and Christ in His life of obedience / and Christ in His love for sinners / and Christ in His grace to the hurting / and Christ in His healing of the sick / and Christ in His deliverance of the possessed and oppressed / and Christ in His liberation of the helpless, and bound and sin-enslaved.

Christ in His suffering and death and resurrection and ascension into glory! Christ in the outpoured Spirit and the distribution of spiritual gifts and His present intercession for us before the throne of God! / Christ in His present rule / and Christ in His promised return / and Christ in the restoration of all things -- where He will gather us to Himself in that place where there will be no more pain or sickness or tears or suffering ever again!

THAT'S what we have to offer people: CHRIST, plain and simple! Not religion! / Not a political agenda! / Not morality! / But "the mystery hidden from ages past... which is CHRIST IN US, the hope of glory!"

If we do nothing else but that we have done our task! Because the rest (the germination of those seeds of the Gospel - that's His work! We plant and we water, as Paul says, but it's GOD who must ultimately bring forth the fruit!