

Make Known the Gospel (Part V) (Evangelism: Whose Job Is It?)

Introduction

Over the last three weeks, we've been reflecting on what is the *only* biblical method of evangelism. We've looked at the *content* of the Gospel message (absolute, authoritative, urgent truth) and what it means for our method of evangelism. We've looked at the *only proper response* to the Gospel message (people commanded to repent and believe) and what it means for our method of evangelism. We've looked at the *sovereignty of God in salvation* (the Father has already chosen His sheep and the Son has already died for His sheep) and what that means for our method of evangelism. And we've looked at the *inherent, life-giving power of the Gospel message itself* (the Holy Spirit works repentance and faith in God's elect *through* the preaching of the Gospel) and what that means for our method of evangelism. All these things have only confirmed and cemented beyond any shadow of a doubt what we learned the first week from that word "*euangelizo*." Evangelism is the *sending out of messengers into the world to boldly preach, and proclaim, and declare the Good News with words to anyone and everyone* who still needs to hear.

And so we've been warned about the dangers of using phrases like "relational evangelism" or "lifestyle evangelism," or a works-based/social gospel evangelism. We've been warned against using the church service as a "*method*" of evangelism. We've seen that rather than something to be "shared," the Gospel is something to be *preached* with a certain boldness and authority.

So today, we come to the question of all questions – the question we've all been asking for the last four weeks. Is evangelism really for "normal" people – for people like you and me? Or is evangelism actually a special task for the specially gifted?

I. Ephesians 4:11-12 – The "gift" of the "Evangelist" and what it means for us

Angelos is a Greek word that has the basic idea of a messenger. Our English word for *angelos*, or "messenger" is just taken right from the Greek: **angelos = Angel**. Angels are *messengers* of God.

Euangelion is the Greek word that we've translated in English as "(the) Gospel" or "[the] Gospel message." (Can you see the "angel" in that word?) Why did we pick the word *Gospel*? Well, *Gospel* comes from the old Anglo-Saxon word *godspell* which meant "glad tidings" or "good news." But there was actually a time when instead of picking a "foreign" word like *Gospel*, we just transliterated the Greek right into English. So you know what we called the **euangelion**? We called it the **evangel** (the Gospel message).

Euangelizo is a verb that we've generally translated in English as "to preach the Gospel." But once again, we could just transliterate the Greek right into English: In this case, to **euangelizo** would be to **evangelize** (to preach the Gospel message).¹

¹ One important thing we need to see here is that "evangelizing" is not making converts, or getting results. Evangelizing is very simply preaching the good news – totally irrespective of any results.

So what do you think the Greek word *euangelistes* means? Contrary to the last two words, which appear *many* times in the New Testament, this word *euangelistes* appears only *three* times, and it's the only one that our Bibles actually do transliterate right from the Greek into the English. So what's the English version of the Greek word **euangelistes**? Well, of course, it's the word **evangelist**. But biblically, what exactly *is* an evangelist?

If the *evangel* is the Gospel message, and if *evangelize* means to preach the Gospel message, then wouldn't an **evangelist** be the *person* who preaches the Gospel message? So now we ask: "Are we really all called to be 'evangelists'?" We read in Ephesians chapter four:

- Ephesians 4:11–12 (cf. 1 Cor. 9:14; Acts 21:8; 2 Tim. 4:5) — [Christ] gave the apostles, the prophets, **the evangelists**, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.

There seems to be an equal emphasis here on building up the body of Christ both inwardly and spiritually, and also outwardly and in numbers. The Apostles travelled around preaching the Gospel and then forming the new disciples into brand new churches before often moving on again to preach the Gospel in a new area and plant yet more new churches. (Rom. 15:20; 2 Cor. 10:13-16) The prophets, on the other hand, were a settled part of each local congregation.

After the Apostles and the prophets, we have the "evangelists" and the "shepherds and teachers." Here again, we seem to have this pattern of the evangelists focused on the outward growth of the church in numbers and then the shepherds and teachers focused on the inward growth of the church in knowledge and in faith. So just like the prophets, the shepherds and teachers would have been a settled part of each local congregation. But what about the evangelists?

Historically,² the church has understood that the evangelists were those who ***followed in the footsteps of the Apostles*** as ***itinerant*** (or travelling) Gospel-preachers and church-planters. In other words, the evangelists were not Apostles, but they continued the itinerant church-planting work of the Apostles even after the Apostles were gone. So "*evangelist*" is really just the more biblical word for "missionary" – or at least for the specific kind of missionary whose focus is on preaching the Gospel where it hasn't been preached before and then planting and establishing new churches.³ We actually never find "missionaries" in the Bible. What we do find are

² Cf. Theodoret (5th century)

³ "Evangelists" are... missionaries who pioneer outreach in areas where the faith has not as yet been proclaimed... Paul turns from itinerant to local ministry. "Pastors and teachers" (Wood, EBC; cf. Bruce, NICNT)

"[The evangelist's] function resembles modern missionaries who bring the message to new territories... In the early church it was thought that the evangelists were those who preached the gospel and were the successors to the apostles in that they laid the foundations of the faith in new areas, appointed shepherds, and then moved to other lands and people." (Hoehner)

"'Evangelists' ... are probably those whom God has especially equipped to travel from place to place with the good news of peace through Christ. Although both Philip and Timothy are settled in one place when they are called 'evangelists' (Acts 21:8; 2 Tim. 4:5), Philip has traveled around preaching the gospel (Acts 8:4-5, 35, 40), and Paul is ready for Timothy to pull up stakes and travel again (2 Tim. 4:9, 21). Paul, then, probably thinks of 'evangelists' as similar to apostles but without their authority because of their lack of direct connection to the historical Jesus." (Thielman; contra the different emphasis of O'Brien)

"In the post-apostolic period it is the evangelists who continue to carry out many of the activities of the apostles and it is the pastors who now exercise the leadership role, alongside the teachers, previously held by the prophets..."

evangelists – itinerant preachers of the Gospel. So instead of talking about Paul’s “missionary journeys,” the far more vivid and biblical language would be to speak of Paul’s “evangelistic journeys.” There’s a lot that the church supports that we can rightly put under the category of “missions” (a word we’ve invented) but how much of what the church supports can we put under that preeminently biblical category of evangelistic preaching and church-planting in places where there is no other Gospel presence? But let’s go back, now, to our original question.

Are all of us called to be evangelists? Well, that’s the same thing as asking if we’re all called to be missionaries! And, of course, the answer is “no.” We’re not all called to travel to places where there’s no Gospel presence in order to preach the Gospel and plant new churches! But now instead of being “let off the hook,” this only begs a hugely important and urgent question.

Once the evangelist has preached the Gospel and planted the church, who in the world is to continue doing the work of evangelism *after* the evangelist had moved on to a new area? If the work of the *evangelist* was to travel to places where there was no existing church and no Gospel presence, then *who* was to be doing the evangelistic preaching of the Gospel in places where there *were already* established churches – **but no evangelists** (because they’d all been sent out to places where there wasn’t any church)? The answer seems to be very clear. If the “evangelist” is only needed where there is no church, then wherever there *is* an established church, it must be the responsibility of that church to do the work of evangelism! But *who* exactly? *Who* in the church is supposed to be doing this evangelistic preaching of the Gospel? As far as I can tell, the Bible has no unique category, no recognized gifting, and no official or special name for who these people are! The Bible doesn’t seem to teach that God will appoint *in every church* “local evangelists,” or even necessarily people with the special “gifting” of evangelism. It’s just assumed that the job of *the Church* in general is evangelism. Indeed, if this were not so, then no sooner would a church be planted by an evangelist than it would die out within a few short generations. The job of *the Church* in general is to **go out as messengers into the community where it’s been planted to boldly preach, and proclaim, and declare the Good News with words to anyone and everyone** who still needs to hear. Ironically, it’s actually the gift of the “*evangelist*” that only emphasizes the **urgent need for the church** as a whole to be purposefully and diligently doing the work of evangelism **after the evangelists have moved on.**

Now so far, someone could say that this is really just an argument from silence – even though it’s a really, really, really powerful and biblical argument from silence! But are there any other places in Scripture that give us more insight into **who** is to be doing the work of evangelism?

Since the term “pastors” covers church leadership in Eph 4, it is likely that here “evangelists” are to be seen as those engaged in mission and the founding of churches and, therefore, as having responsibilities beyond the local congregation. A further reason for their mention here could be that the churches in Asia Minor which are being addressed, were not founded directly by Paul but by just such people, co-workers and followers of Paul who continued his type of missionary activity” (Lincoln, WBC)

“Evangelists were itinerant preachers, as Theodoret and other early writers describe them. They were really missionaries sent to preach the Gospel where it had not previously been known... The words *evangelists* and *pastors* are both used about making the Gospel known; but when, as here, the evangelist is distinguished from the teacher, the only distinction is between the person who makes the Gospel known where it had not been heard and an instructor of those who were already Christians.” (Hodge)

II. Acts 8:1-4; 11:19-21⁴ – The “Dispersion” and what it means for us

After the last exile of Israel in 586 B.C., the Jews were scattered or “dispersed” throughout almost all of the known world. Eventually, many of the Jews did return to their homeland, but there were still numerous Jewish families who remained in the places where they’d been born and raised, scattered all throughout the now (in the NT) Roman Empire. These Jews living abroad had a technical name – they were actually called “the Dispersion.” So in John chapter seven, the Jews said to one another:

- John 7:35 (cf. James 1:1) — Where does [Jesus] intend to go that we will not find him? Does he intend to go to the Dispersion [*diaspora*] among the Greeks?

The Dispersion had *already happened*. The Dispersion *already existed* – it was already an accomplished fact. But in Acts chapter eight, what we see is the beginning of a *new* “Dispersion.”

- Acts 8:1 (cf. James 1:1) — There arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and **they were all scattered** [dispersed; *diaspeiro*] throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria.

This isn’t just *Jews* being dispersed from Jerusalem (that’s already happened). This time, it’s Jewish *Christians* who are being dispersed from Jerusalem. And what we’re about to see is that this new Dispersion has a whole new meaning that the old one never had. Eventually, it wasn’t just the Jewish Christians, but even the Gentile Christians and *all* Christians everywhere who officially came to be called “the Dispersion.” So Peter starts one of his letters like this:

- 1 Peter 1:1 — Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to those who are elect exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia.

But where are these Jewish and Gentile Christians exiled *from*? Not from the earthly Jerusalem, but from the heavenly Jerusalem – the Jerusalem that is above. They’re all citizens of this heavenly Jerusalem living now as exiles *dispersed* throughout the world. (cf. Isa. 11:12; Zeph. 3:10) And what exactly is the *point* or the *meaning* of this *new* Dispersion? Luke answers in Acts chapter eight, verse four:

- Acts 8:4 (cf. 11:19-21) — **Now those who were dispersed went about *preaching* [*euangelizo*] the word.**

See how when Luke first introduces us to this brand new “Dispersion,” he carefully points out that this Dispersion was really just the means for the spreading abroad of the Gospel through evangelism – through the “*preaching*” of the “*word*” about Jesus – about His death and resurrection. Notice how Luke uses the *same exact language* to describe both what the Apostles and evangelists were doing, and now also what the dispersed and scattered Christians were doing. The *whole point* of the dispersion *is* the evangelistic *preaching* of the Gospel. If it were not for this evangelistic preaching of the Gospel, there would be no point to the Dispersion – no

⁴ On these two passages see especially Peterson (PNTC)

point for the existence of God's people *all* scattered throughout the world. And so one commentator summarizes:

“Before [Luke] launches into a description of Philip's distinctive ministry [Philip was an itinerant evangelist!; Acts 21:8], [he] observes the extent to which those who had been scattered were involved in the task of evangelism... Ordinary believers preached the word wherever they went... The apostles and all who were scattered because of the persecution proclaimed the same message and were engaged in the same activity.”
(Peterson)

The point of the *dispersion* of the dispersion of the Church *is* ultimately nothing other than *evangelism*. Again, if it were not for the evangelistic preaching of the Gospel, there would be no point whatsoever for the continued existence of the Church dispersed in the world. And so we see that the task of evangelism – of boldly preaching and proclaiming the Gospel – is the task of regular, ordinary believers. As Luke says, “Those who were dispersed went about preaching the word.” In light of this, we can better appreciate what we read in Philippians about the example of the believers who were dispersed in Rome.

III. Philippians 1:12-18⁵ – The example of the Church in Rome and what it means for us

Paul wrote a letter to the Christians in the city of Philippi while he was a prisoner in Rome. The Philippians weren't necessarily facing imprisonment, but they were definitely facing opposition and persecution – just like Paul. Paul knew how suffering and persecution could make people feel defeated and discouraged. He knew how even his own imprisonment might cause the churches to be fearful and afraid. And so he wrote to the Christians in Philippi:

- **Philippians 1:12–13** — I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ.

Paul wants the Philippians to know that the very thing they might have thought would be a defeat to the Gospel has actually only served to “advance the Gospel.” (2 Tim. 2:9) For Paul, this can only be “the language of evangelism.” What this means is that Paul has only continued his evangelistic activities by evangelizing the palace guard itself! (Fee; NICNT) His imprisonment has only given him the otherwise impossible opportunity to preach the Gospel to the whole imperial guard! And so Paul can even conclude his letter with these words: “All the saints greet you, especially those of Caesar's household.” (Phil. 4:22) The Philippians were being persecuted by people loyal to Caesar; but in Rome, Paul was using his imprisonment by Caesar as an opportunity to preach the Gospel to Caesar's own household. Far from silencing Paul, his chains only gave him unprecedented opportunities to boldly preach and proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ. But his chains have done even *more* than this. His imprisonment has served to advance the Gospel in one other way as well. Paul goes on to write:

- **Philippians 1:14** — And *most of the brothers*, having become *confident in the Lord* by my imprisonment, *dare all the more to speak the word* without fear.

⁵ On this passage see especially Hansen (PNTC) and Fee (NICNT)

When Paul says “most of the brothers,” he means the majority of all the believers—both brothers and sisters—in Rome.⁶ He’s not talking about “professionals,” or church leaders, or even specially gifted people. He’s talking about normal, everyday believers just like you and me. And what are these normal, everyday believers doing? In Acts 8 the dispersed believers “went about preaching the word.” And so also here in Philippians 1 the majority of the brothers and sisters are “speaking the word.” Paul will go on to say that this “speaking” of the “word” is nothing other than the majority of the brothers and sisters “*preaching*” (*kerusso*) and “*proclaiming*” (*katangelo*) “Christ.” (cf. Phil. 1:15-18)

So what’s the connection here between Paul’s imprisonment and the majority of the believers’ becoming confident in the Lord and daring all the more to speak the word without fear? How is it that what’s happened is actually the exact opposite of what we would have expected? Well, when the believers heard that Paul was using his chains as an opportunity to preach the Gospel even to the imperial guard, something happened inside them. They were inspired by Paul’s example to put their *own* confidence in the Lord and to dare all the more to preach the Gospel themselves. That word for “all the more” actually refers to something “very great,” “excessive,” even “surpassingly” great (LN; 2 Cor. 2:7; 7:13; 8:2) Paul says that the daring of these brothers and sisters to preach the Gospel even in the face of opposition was even *surpassing all bounds*. Paul’s example of preaching the Gospel even in prison, and even to the guard of Caesar himself, inspired in the believers a new found confidence in the Lord. They dared exceedingly; they dared greatly; they dared to the highest degree. Their fears were all taken away, and they were filled with an *amazing, extraordinary courage* to preach and proclaim the Gospel. (cf. NEB)

Isn’t it just this courage and this daring that we need? In much of the so-called relational or lifestyle evangelism and “outreach” in the church today, there really is no need for “daring.” The offense of the Gospel has been compromised – and so instead of being preached, it’s now “shared”; instead of people being commanded and urged, they’re now suggestively invited. The offense of sin and coming wrath has been compromised by an overwhelming emphasis on the “non-offensive” themes of God’s love and tender compassion. But we must remember that true, biblical evangelism is the kind that will always require a *daring* that overwhelms our fear.

Conclusion

Relationships will never save anyone. Lifestyles will never save anyone. Love and good works will never save anyone. The only thing that’s ever saved anyone is the *message* of the Gospel – the true, full, uncompromised Gospel *message*.

And so our job as those still here after the evangelists have gone, our job as “the Dispersion” scattered throughout the world, our job as “the brothers and sisters” is this – it’s to preach and

⁶ Cf. NRSV; NET; NIV; NLT; NCV; and most commentators. “Michael... observes (correctly) that Paul is speaking of all believers, not just about those in leadership (ministers)... Ellis [cf. Hawthorne, WBC] proposes that ‘brothers’ at times becomes a quasi-technical term for Paul’s ‘co-workers,’ or at least for ‘leaders in ministry.’ But in view of Paul’s usage elsewhere, and especially in view of his use of the vocative to address the entire community of believers to whom he writes (e.g., Phil. 1:12; 3:1, 13, 17; 4:1), one seems hard pressed to make that work here.” (Fee, NICNT)

declare *the message*; it's to get *the message* out there, speaking it and proclaiming it to those who still have not heard. Do we really believe that? *Really?* Do I? And if so, what can we *do* about it? The daring of those first Christians in Rome was in the face of official state persecution. How much more, then, should we be able to dare exceedingly to preach the Gospel as we, too, put our confidence in the Lord?

Whose job is evangelism? It's mine, and it's yours. So what will this mean for the unsaved neighbors, and co-workers, and acquaintances that you already know? What about the person at the gas station or at the grocery store? And what might this mean for our existence as a church in the community of Morris? How might we work together to earnestly and boldly preach the Gospel message to those in Morris who still have not heard? Putting our confidence in the Lord, how might we dare exceedingly and beyond all measure to preach the Gospel to all of Morris?