

Evangelism: Free to Obey

Introduction

As a church, we've been going to the Scriptures over the last month and a half to try and understand 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 obey the Gospel – 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 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 Gospel Message 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.

Finally, two weeks ago, we learned that evangelism (biblically defined) really is for “normal” people – for people like you and me. *Our* privilege as those still here after all the evangelists have gone, as “the Dispersion” scattered throughout the world, and most simply as “the brothers and sisters” is this: Being confident in the Lord we can *all* dare exceedingly to proclaim the message that saves.

This morning, I want to start off by looking at two remaining passages of Scripture that are often used to guide our practice of evangelism. The reason for this is that it's incredibly important for us to understand not only what these verses are *not* saying, but also what they *are* saying. So the first and most famous of the two passages is 1 Peter 3:15.

1 Peter 3:15 (NIV) — Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.

Maybe without our meaning it to, we can use this verse as a justification to wait for the unbeliever to *come to us* and *initiate* asking us questions about why we're so “different.” We may also use this verse to support the idea of creating as many relational opportunities as

possible as a context for “gently sharing” the Gospel. But how does this all fit with the “bold” and “daring” preaching, and declaring, and proclaiming that we’ve seen over the last several weeks? How does this fit with the New Testament pattern of *first* “preaching the Gospel” and *then* investing relationally in the Church with those who come to faith in Christ (e.g. Paul; cf. the example of Jesus)?

When it comes to 1 Peter 3, our first clue is actually in the little word, “*but*” (Greek, “*alla*”). Peter seems to be concerned that in the process of giving an “answer” it may be tempting for the Christians to be mean-spirited, bitter, and resentful. So he cautions them: Yes, always be prepared to give an answer, “*but* [be sure that you] do this with gentleness.” Now why would the Christians be tempted to be bitter and resentful as they’re giving an answer to those who ask about the hope they have? Well, the Greek word for “answer” actually always refers to an argument of the defense (*apologia*). It means, “To speak on behalf of oneself... against accusations presumed to be false.” (L&N)

- Luke 12:11 — When they bring you before the synagogues and the rulers and the authorities, do not be anxious about how you should *defend* yourself.
- 2 Corinthians 7:11 — See what earnestness this godly grief has produced in you, but also what eagerness to *clear* yourselves.

So we should translate in Peter: “Always be prepared to make a *defense*.” (cf. NASB; NRSV; HCSB; ESV; YLT) A defense to whom? Paul says: “To everyone who *asks* you.” But that word for “ask” can mean “to ask with urgency, even to the point of demanding” (L&N)

- Luke 23:23 (cf. 1 Cor. 1:22; Acts 16:29; Mat. 5:42; Heb. 12:19) — They were urgent, *demanding* with loud cries that [Jesus] should be crucified.

And so here in Peter we could really translate: “Always be prepared to make a *defense* to anyone who *demand*s you.” (cf. NRSV) Peter says: “To anyone who demands from you a *reason* for the hope that you have.” The last thing we need to see here is that the Greek word for reason (*logos*) can have the idea (as it does here) of an “accounting.” So we could translate with the NRSV:

- 1 Peter 3:15 — Always be ready to make your *defense* to anyone who *demand*s from you an *accounting* for the hope that is in you.

The situation Peter seems to be assuming is that these Christians are finding themselves in the “hot seat” – in the “crosshairs” of the world. They’re finding themselves in situations where they have to defend their Christian faith against those who are critical, and maybe even hostile, and not at all to people who are genuinely interested in hearing the Gospel. And so now with this understanding, we can read the surrounding context. Peter writes:

- 1 Peter 3:13–17 — Even if you should *suffer for righteousness’ sake*, you will be blessed. *Have no fear of them, nor be troubled*, but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a *defense* to anyone who *demand*s from you an *accounting* for the hope that is in you; *yet do it with gentleness¹ and respect*, having a good conscience,

¹ Paul also emphasizes the unique need for “gentleness” when dealing with opposition:

so that, *when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame.*²

The point of Peter seems to be the same general point that Paul is making when he says in Colossians chapter four:

II. Colossians 4:2–6 — Pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ, on account of which I am in prison— that I may make it clear, which is how I ought to speak. [You also,] Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time. Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.

Notice how Paul speaks of “answering” (*apokrinomai*), which again implies here that you’re in the hot seat.³ Notice how Paul says “how you *ought* (*dei*) to answer,” which implies that the Christians he’s writing to will naturally be tempted to “answer” in ways that they shouldn’t! And notice that the context for all of this is Paul’s own mistreatment and imprisonment at the hands of the world. Paul’s point is that on the one hand, our **conduct** must not give outsiders any unnecessary reason to mock the Gospel (“walk in wisdom toward outsiders”). In the same way, our **speech** must not give outsiders any unnecessary reason to attack the Gospel.

To the extent that we live in a hostile and critical world that requires “answers” and “arguments,” we need to make sure that our answers are always gracious and seasoned with salt. The emphasis here is not so much on evangelism (preaching the Gospel), as it is on apologetics (defending the Gospel). So in our apologetics (in our defense and confirmation of the Gospel; Phil. 1:7), we need to especially make sure that our manner is always characterized by “gentleness” in true “reverence” of Christ.

Now why are both Paul and Peter so careful to emphasize this “gentleness”? Isn’t it because this is just the place where we’re most tempted to become harsh and argumentative, and abrasive? The point here is not that we should be pushovers, or that we should compromise in any way.

2 Timothy 2:24–25 — The Lord’s servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone... *correcting his opponents with gentleness.*

² “In a more general sense, ἀπολογία refers to an argument made in one’s own behalf in the face of misunderstanding or criticism (1 Cor 9:3; 2 Cor 7:11).” (Michaels, WBC)

“When believers encounter a hostile world and are challenged concerning their faith, the temptation to respond harshly increases. Defending a position could easily be transmuted into attacking one’s opponents. Hence, Peter added that the defense must be made “with gentleness and reverence” (NRSV, *meta prautētos kai phobou*).” (Schreiner; NAC)

“Christians, out of reverence to Christ, should be prepared to respond fully to their often hostile questions about the faith... Jesus, of course, is likely the conscious basis for Peter’s teaching, for in the sayings recorded in Luke 12:4–12 he says, ‘Do not fear those who kill the body... fear him who has power to cast into hell... The Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what to say.’ ... Instead of a response that puts down the other person or criticizes the enemy, Peter wishes a gentle, humble explanation in tune with the attitude of Christ.” (Davids; NICNT)

³ With respect to Paul’s use of the language, “how you ought to *answer* each person,” Moo writes: “By putting it this way, Paul assumes that unbelievers will be raising questions about the faith of the Colossian Christians, questions that may be neutral or even, perhaps, hostile.” (PNTC) And Bruce comments, “If Christians practice grace of speech, it will not desert them when they find themselves suddenly confronted by the necessity of defending their belief.” (NICNT)

No! *We are defending* the faith! But it's just in those times that we feel like we're under attack for our Christian faith that it's *most easy* for us to respond *in kind*. And this we absolutely must *not* do – for the sake of our *conscience*, Peter says, and for the sake of the Gospel! When we see examples of the world's hostility in the news, in entertainment, in politics, how often do we respond with sarcasm, and belligerence, and a carnal “boldness” – even in our conversations with one another? But it's this carnal “boldness” that the Bible warns us against.

Brothers and sisters, to the extent that we are increasingly living in a hostile culture, we need to make especially sure that our defense and confirmation of the Gospel is *always* characterized by a gracious and a gentle spirit. The Bible is clear! And the only way for us to do this is if we *consciously* conduct ourselves in true reverence of Christ. But to the extent that we live in a world that is lost and dying, and an object of coming wrath, we need to boldly preach and proclaim and declare the Gospel as the authoritative, and saving message that it is. Why do you think it is that when it comes to evangelism (strictly speaking), the overwhelming emphasis of the Bible is never on gentleness, but always on boldness?⁴ Of course, the point here isn't that we don't need to have any gentleness! It's just that that's not usually our problem. Our biggest problem in true evangelism is being ruled by fear and timidity. Our biggest problem in evangelism is the temptation to replace *authoritative proclamation* with a more “*loving*” and *suggestive sharing* of the Gospel – or even sometimes with nothing at all. So the emphasis of the Bible is always this: apologetics with gentleness, but evangelism with boldness. ***Defend*** the Gospel ***to those who require it***, with gentleness; ***preach*** the Gospel ***to any and all who still need to hear***, with boldness.

Conclusion (Free to Obey)

So I think there we have it. Over the last several weeks, I believe we've thoroughly summarized the whole biblical teaching on “evangelism.” And it appears to run *counter* to many of our most basic ideas about evangelism today. All of these messages will be permanently available under the link “Make Known the Gospel” on the “sermons” page of our website. I really would encourage you to review these messages either by listening to them or reading them, or doing both together. The reason I say this is because I believe that we'll only be obedient to the extent that we really are ***convinced*** of exactly what the Bible itself is teaching – and not just convinced, but also even excited.

So the question, now, is just this: What are we going to do about what the Bible teaches? How are we going to live in glad and joyful obedience to what we have come to understand is the clear teaching of God's Word on evangelism? I have no desire for any of us to be “guilted,” but there's almost certainly a need for most of us to be convicted. Being “guilted” just leads to the burden of despair, but being convicted leads to repentance and then to the freedom of obedience.

So what will this obedience look like first of all for us as individuals? The obvious place for all of us to start is wherever we already have contact, or any existing relationships with the unsaved – with those who are still destined for wrath. Remember, 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 boldly proclaimed *message* of the Gospel. Will you put your

⁴ Acts 4:29–31; 9:27–28; 13:46; 14:3; 18:24–26; 19:8; 26:24–26; 28:30–31; 1 Thess. 2:1–2; Eph. 6:18–20; Phil. 1:14

confidence in the Lord, and dare exceedingly to preach the Gospel to the unsaved people that God is faithful to put in your way?

But now I also want to ask: What might this obedience look like for us as a church body that exists in the community of Morris? How might we work together to earnestly and boldly preach the Gospel message to *all* those in Morris who still have not heard? Well, the only way to do this is to go out to where the people are. This is assumed in the very “definition” of evangelism. And this is exactly what we see modeled in the Scriptures.

Peter preached out in the streets to the crowds who had gathered for Pentecost. (Acts 2:5-14) Peter was sent to Cornelius’ house to preach the Gospel. (Acts 11:13-14) Philip went out into the public places of Samaria and preached wherever he could find a crowd. (Acts 8:5-6, 25) Philip was sent out to find a chariot traveling along a desert road. (Acts 8:26-35) The Apostles went out to preach in the public gathering place at the Temple. (Acts 5:12, 21, 25) Paul went out to preach in the synagogues (everyone there still needed to hear about the Messiah). (Acts 9:20; 13:5, 14-15; 14:1; 17:10, 17; 18:4, 19; 19:8) Paul went out to a riverside. (Acts 16:13) He went out to the market places. (Acts 17:17) He went out to any public gathering place available. (Acts 14:6-11; cf. 19:9-10) And in Acts chapter eight, the Dispersion—that’s you and me—“went about” (we could say, “*out* and about”) preaching the Gospel. (Acts 8:4; cf. 11:19-21)

It’s important that we *not* invite people *into* the assembly of the church as a *method* of “evangelism.” So how can we, as a church, *go out* to where the people of Morris are and preach the Gospel? What kind of evangelism ministry might God call us, as a Church, to have? One huge advantage that we have today (which they didn’t have in Bible times) is the ability to mass produce printed literature with *the Gospel message* (tracts). I think in an evangelism ministry, one of the best things we can do is to *personally* hand out a tract with an offer to explain what the Gospel is right then and there.

So what about: Parks. Downtown Morris. Walking down the sidewalk.

Excuse me, could I give you this tract? It explains what the Bible says about the good news.

Yes.

It’s really short. If you have a moment, I’d love to explain it.

Yes. (Explain)

No. (OK, Well, I hope you’ll just take a couple of minutes to read this. It explains the good news about Jesus Christ and the way for our sins to be forgiven. It’s really, really important.)

Note the number on the back.

What about: Door to door evangelism.

Hi, I’m _____, and I’m from Living Word Bible Church here in Morris. We’re just coming around today seeing if people know what the Bible says about the good news. I wondered if you’d have just a second for me to tell it to you?

Yes. (Explain)

No.

OK. Would you want me to try back at a better time? Can I leave you with this tract? It explains the good news about Jesus Christ and the way for our sins to be forgiven. It's really important! (Note the number on the back.)

Before I go, is there anything I can pray about for you or your family?

Can I pray with you right now? (Gospel-centered prayer)

At this point, some of us might be thinking: "Can this really be effective?" Well, it depends on what we mean by effectiveness. We can't force anyone to listen, much less work the miracle of the new birth in people's hearts! But we do know that it's only by the hearing of the Gospel message that anyone in the history of the world has ever been saved. Can preaching the Gospel to a complete stranger really be effective? To me, it's as simple as this: If the Gospel of Jesus really is the power of God to save, then the answer is "yes." I don't know how many elect sheep there are at this moment in Morris just waiting to hear the Gospel message. Maybe there are "many" (Acts 18:10), and maybe there are only a few. But whether our message will be more often an aroma of death or an aroma of life (2 Cor. 2:15-16), our privilege and high calling as a Church is to preach – always prayerfully (Eph. 6:18-20; Col. 4:3; 2 Thess. 3:1; Acts 4:29; Rom. 10:1), and always depending on the Spirit (Acts 1:8; 2:14-18).