

EVANGELISM—PART ONE

By Bob Young

Introduction

It is an exciting thing to be a Christian. We can be constantly renewed, restored, revitalized. I challenge you to think with me today. Examine a biblical text, make contemporary application, challenge us toward implementation.

Let me set the stage, describe our current situation.

- We were at one time declared to be the fastest growing religious group in the U.S. We used the technology available very well—radio. We focused on evangelism, Home Bible Studies, Jule Miller filmstrips, Open Bible Studies, a variety of methods.
- After WW2, radio was replaced by television, and I think it fair to say that we never really learned to use television well. Accompanying that change, there was a decrease in evangelistic fervor among churches of Christ.
- When that was brought to our attention, we reaffirmed the power of the gospel and there was an increase in evangelism for a brief period of time. We were not big on technology, but we worked diligently in church dynamics.
- All of this was occurring at a time when there was an unparalleled shift occurring in Western society, a shift that continues at record pace.
- This cultural shift must inform our efforts in evangelism if we are to be effective. Further, we must consider the newest technologies and learn how to use them well.

The Cultural Shift Described

Because change tends to get past us unnoticed, we often carry on business as usual. This is no stationary world! As early as 1982, John Naisbitt's Megatrends suggested new directions. "During turbulent times, many people need structure--not ambiguity--in their lives." While the number of felt needs in our world has increased, the secularization of our society has eliminated religion as a popular answer. Os Guinness (The Gravedigger File, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1983, 52-53) says that in secularization religious ideas become "less meaningful and religious institutions more marginal." Today the secularized are a large segment of our nation. Nor are Christians or our churches immune to the influences of secularization.

For the secular person who is without God in the world (Eph. 2:12), life's credo or personal philosophy does not include God. Even if God's existence is acknowledged from a distance, he is not considered a vital part of human experience.

Many cultural trends could be identified, most of which would be related in some way to this changing worldview which we are describing. Increased individualism, loss of dependence upon authority, increased violence, lessened religious influences, the impersonalization which resulted from technological advances, increased loneliness, more unhealthy relationships and families, increased divorce rates--all of these frequently heard concerns indicate that something is happening in our society.

When a cultural shift takes place, people change. If we as Christians--aliens, foreigners and strangers--maintain the countercurrent and are not caught up in the change, the obvious differences between us and those around us are unsettling.

We often tend to bury our heads in the past, "people are people, the gospel is the gospel, they simply are not interested." Effective communication requires understanding between the sender and the receiver. Unless we make diligent effort to make certain understanding is present, we have failed to communicate the message.

Who is speaking to the people around us? We are not dealing with philosophy, we are answering a mandate to disciple people. We are battling ideas, but we must be cautious lest we find ourselves in the untenable position of personally battling the people who hold those ideas.

How can we effectively communicate the gospel message in our world? How can we facilitate understanding? I believe the book of Acts provides helpful answers as we think about taking the gospel to a society that is basically unchurched. How can we combat the opposing public opinion, misinformation, and prevailing self-sufficiency? How can we avoid the trap of reshaping the gospel into a "gospel of popular issues," or a "gospel of special emphasis," or a "gospel of the church"? How can we develop an offense when the natural tendency of most Christians is to pull into isolation? How can we deal with our fears? How can we address the fears of those about us?

Effective evangelism is a process, not merely an activity or an event. Evangelism is the process of communicating the gospel. This may be verbal, but it must also be incarnational and demonstrative. That evangelism involves presence, proclamation, and persuasion is accurate.

Most Christians I know are doing a reasonable job of "presence." Our lives are a reasonable reflection of Jesus. We are not perfect, but our commitment to Christ can be seen by many of those around us. Nor is that the matter that Paul illustrates.

Proclaiming the Gospel--How?

Proclamation (Greek, *kerusso*) means to announce, proclaim, or herald. The *kerux* was a herald of the king. None doubt that we are commanded to proclaim the gospel, or that God intends the gospel to be preached (*kerusso*, Matt. 24:14) in the whole world. The Great Commission in Mark and Luke uses the same word to describe our command to spread the gospel message. But how?

I remember talking to a non-Christian while I was living in Michigan. He was about 29 years old. For 29 years, he had done what he wanted to do, established his habits and lifestyle, developed his own personal philosophy of life that reflected his worldview. He had almost exclusively fed his mind with things contrary to the word of God. I spent a couple of hours a week with him for a little over a month. What did I expect to happen? I expected him to conclude that the direction of his life was wrong. "For 29 years, I've been messed up, but I'm going to make a 180 degree about face." While that does happen in some situations, I sadly report that it did not happen with this young man. Why?

Was the gospel without power in his situation? Surely not! Are we expecting the impossible? Yes and no. We can expect results from the proclamation of the gospel because the power is God's. But not every person we meet is prepared. Soil must be prepared. Some soil is not good nor bad, but simply unprepared. Further, in gardening, bad soil can be changed to good soil. We can cultivate and improve the soil. This too is a part of the evangelistic process.

The Acts Approach [Jim Petersen, Living Proof--Sharing the Gospel Naturally (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 1989), 73-75.]

In the early chapters of Acts, the gospel was preached primarily to prepared people. As late as Acts 13, Paul in Pisidian Antioch is addressing Jews, and God-fearing, God-worshiping Gentiles. The Jews on the day of Pentecost were prepared by heritage. They readily responded to the proclamation of the gospel. They had a 1500-year religious heritage. They were prepared. Others converted in the early chapters of Acts were also prepared--Gentiles who were either Jewish proselytes or God-fearers. In one sense, the eunuch is the first Gentile convert, but we do not call him that because he was a Jewish proselyte. Although he was Gentile by birth, he was Jewish by religion. Cornelius was a Gentile, devout and God-fearing. For half of the book of Acts, responses were numerous. We read of 3000 on the first day. The 5000 a few weeks later numbered only the men. The gospel was being preached to people with a spiritual interest and heritage. Acts continually announces numbers--a great company, the church increased.

In the second half of the book of Acts, something changes. After Paul turns to the Gentiles (Acts 13:47-48), he continues to go first to the synagogue, but the results are never again the same. He is stoned and left for dead. Conflict with Judaism intensifies. When Paul arrives in Philippi in Acts 16, there is no synagogue so he and Silas go to a place of prayer. Confronting the secular side of society lands them in prison. The jailor is converted with his house, but the results were apparently meager. In Thessalonica in the synagogue, the message is accepted by some of the women and God-fearing Gentiles, but Paul is soon run out of town. The Thessalonian Jews also run Paul out of Berea, although there appears to be some increased receptivity. In Athens, we have a message recorded to a pagan crowd. The content of the message is obviously different. Paul is philosophical, he quotes other sources in addressing the crowd. He begins with the person of God, then speaks of Jesus and the resurrection. The results were almost non-existent according to Scripture. Is Paul a worse speaker than Peter was on Pentecost? Is the Spirit no longer present? What is the difference?

The difference was in the preparation of the audience. When the gospel is proclaimed to people with a religious heritage, results are obvious. When the gospel is proclaimed to the unchurched of the first century, results are considerably less. It is no different in our day.

A Detailed Look at Acts 13

This chapter is a turning point in the book of Acts, so let us review: ascension, waiting, selection of Matthias, day of Pentecost--3000 Jews, number of disciples is 5000, problems in church--Acts 5,6,7, Stephen, 6:7-- priests obedient to faith. Then the church is scattered--8:4; eunuch is first foreigner convert, a Gentile but Jewish by religion, a proselyte. In Acts 10, Cornelius becomes a Christian, Peter explains action in chapter 11, especially note 11:19.

By Acts 13, church is ready to take gospel to Asia Minor, read of first journey of Paul, come to our text, want to see the significance of this turning point. In 13:16, Paul addresses Israel, Gentiles who worship God. In v. 26, Israel, God-fearers. Recall this phrase from description of Cornelius in chapter 10. Up to this time, converts were all pretty much alike. But after rejection in Pisidian Antioch, when Jews rejected message, jealousy (note v. 46), then turn to Gentiles, to pagans. Going beyond the God-fearers, not only to proselytes to Judaism, but to pagan Gentiles.

Applications

This is a relevant text in our nation at the beginning of the 21st century. Relevant in our world if we are to take the gospel to the whole world. Mostly up to this point in our nation, we have been like the Christians in the early chapters of Acts, going to religious people, to those not requiring too much change, just a little, many of our converts already know the basics of Scripture. Those we have typically converted are those who have studied the Bible, God-fearers, religious people even though there were differences.

Our world is less and less Christian. In New Zealand during a mission trip, we often heard, "I'm not religious." Our goal is to take the gospel to our community, our world, this world, the entire world. Our goal is to take the gospel to pagans, to genuine Gentiles, to the unchurched as well as to the church. At least two-thirds of our nation is radically unchurched. Many have been away from church so long--for two or three generations--that the basics of Christianity have been forgotten and lost.

How will we reach these? Will we go to the synagogues, as Paul did? We do not do this, we do not go to other churches, to other believing situations. Yes, Paul continued to do that, but there is a necessity of encounter in a broader field. I fear that the church of Jesus Christ has confined itself in jail of own making, way-laying the way, chaining ourselves, but this is of our own doing. No locks imprison us. The lock is on our minds, in our understanding of the challenge, in exploring the methods we will need to take the gospel to our community and world in vibrant way.

It is time to dream a new dream. We must come face to face with the truth that we are not doing too well with the God-fearers, let alone with the pagans in our world. We are not getting the job done. We are in danger of being navel-gazers, self-centered, a worshiping society. What happens in our church buildings is only a small part of our service in cause of Christ? We must return to our central focus, make it real in our lives, more than slogan, mottoes, mission statements, and banners on our walls.

We have talked so much about family and love that we have forgotten the army metaphor in Scripture, the necessity of militant conflict and conquest. Interesting point from Matt. 16--the gates of Hades shall not prevail against church. What do you envision when you read these verses? The church is militantly attacking the strongholds of Satan, tearing them down, capturing.

We must get back to influencing our neighborhoods, communities, and world for Jesus. We must rescue the gospel from its invisibility, and make it a leaven that penetrates and changes--first us, then others. We must rethink what we do when we assemble, and why. What are our motives? We have at times been so concerned about being scriptural in the forms of worship that we have lost our concern about being scriptural in the purpose of worship. Are we here today for the right reasons, will we accomplish what God intends his assembled people to accomplish? A scriptural assembly renews our sense of mission and our passion to fulfill the mission. When we go forth, "We cannot but speak." We will press the battle.

This attitude will focus the fact that we are too busy to be drawn into church issues and problems. We are too busy to fuss and fight. This understanding of the gospel to the Gentiles as representative of our challenge today will rescue the church from its pettiness and littleness, and get us back on track about the glorious gospel which is God's power to salvation.

We go forth, bringing abundant life, channeling blessings, bringing rest to the weary, bringing grace, mercy and peace to a world starving for comfort, consolation and encouragement. Most of all, in Christ, we bring escape from sin and its guilt.

How do we encourage people to take us, our Lord, and the gospel seriously? The credibility of Christianity is at stake. Half-hearted religions scattered up and down our avenues will not make it with the Gentiles in our nation. The reason for the credibility crisis is simple: Christians aren't much different from anybody else, nor do many seem to want to be. What incentive is there to investigate a faith that has lost its reputation for making a difference? If the modern brand of Christianity is not producing behavioral change, what do we have to offer those who are not Christians? People must see the difference Jesus makes in our homes, schools, business, and relationships. Primitive Christianity exploded on the scene of paganism in first century because of the contrast it provided. Christianity brought meaning, purpose, forgiveness. Nothing less will return our nation to the power of the Christ.

Nor should we confuse community acceptance with credibility. When everybody loves us, we may have ceased to function as the counter culture we were designed to be. The early church impacted its culture. As you contemplate the significance of Acts 13, I challenge you to consider how we can reach out and impact our culture, change our world, alter our community. We are going out to a pagan society, religion is generally unwelcome. But, the Christianity of Jesus shines brighter than ever. What an opportunity is ours to show the surpassing power and greatness of the gospel, 2 Cor. 4:5-7, to become a pleasing aroma.

We must get out of our assemblies, into the streets. Unless one ventures into our assemblies or is recipient of our benevolence, in most places the world never knows we exist. Our light is under the bushel, or in our buildings. We are having little impact on morals and values. Our limited media exposure generally comes across as preachy at worst or churchy at best.

Think with me about a well-known text in John 4, Jesus' prayer for laborers for the harvest. Over thirty years ago, Elton Trueblood wrote, "The church is intended as a concrete answer to the prayer that laborers be sent forth into the harvest. The company of Jesus is not people streaming to a shrine, it is not people making up an audience for a speaker, it is laborers engaged in the harvesting task of reaching their perplexed and seeking brethren with something so vital that, if it is received, it will change lives."

Lives are changed from defeat to victory. Perplexity and lostness win the victory that leads to certainty and confidence. Resurrection victory overcomes death. The powerless are empowered. Losers become winners.

Our Unchurched Society Must be Prepared for the Gospel!

Religious polls suggest that approximately 1/3 of the U.S. population is churched, 1/3 minimally churched, and 1/3 unchurched. One poll that yields these numbers considers church attendance once a month as churched, while the minimally churched must attend church at least 4 times a year. Consider. Our society is significantly unchurched. We are dealing with the "nevers" and the "dones." Perhaps 50-60% of the U.S. population has no significant religious heritage. Some families are two or three generations removed from church involvement. Many people in our neighborhoods have no personal experience with church other than weddings and funerals.

Unchurched people are basically unprepared to hear the gospel. Our traditional gospel meetings, home Bible studies, media efforts, or invitations to church or small groups are not going to change them because they are yet unprepared to understand the message. Our strategy for evangelism must first address preparation.

Proclamation is commanded and is effective, but must be done at the proper time. Preparation must precede proclamation as plowing must precede sowing. Without proper preparation, proclamation is limited.

Paul's Method Makes Sense

Notice again Paul's approach in Acts. He claims he has "fully proclaimed the gospel of Christ from Jerusalem to Illyricum" (Rom. 15:19). Had Paul converted everyone? Had Paul finished his work in these regions? Obviously not. Paul's approach was to go to a city, reap those who were prepared, establish them, and move on to another city. Paul's ministry method was to visit cities to establish an initial group of believers. He would perhaps visit them again to encourage them, but he was depending upon them to spread the gospel in their region. Paul did not settle down for long. He was in Corinth 18 months, but only because of God's urging. He met so little success he was ready to move on. He came back to Ephesus and stayed there three years. What one should make of Paul the schoolteacher is uncertain, but one possibility is that proclaiming the gospel in traditionally religious spheres was so ineffective that he turned to the educational arena. Whatever the reason, we know that the strategy worked for he was able to say the gospel had gone into all the world (Col. 1:5,23).

Note that getting substantial results from proclamation presupposes some advance preparation (planting and watering) of the hearers. Are we continuing to proclaim to unprepared people? I have participated in some very successful gospel meetings. In every case, the local preacher had a number of persons prepared, so that a minimum of proclamation coupled with persuasion would reap the harvest.

Evangelism is not only reaping. Evangelism is plowing, sowing, and watering. Evangelism is a process. Premature reaping is disastrous.

We tend to try to emulate Paul, but miss an important element from the picture portrayed in Acts. We think that if we could just get every person on the face of the earth to hear the gospel one time, our job would be done. If we could in fact achieve this worthy goal, our job would only be begun. Churches would be established, spiritual centers from which the gospel could spread would spring up in many places. But what of those who were unprepared when the gospel went forth? When will they hear?

Consider an illustration. How many of your friends are close to the kingdom? What percentage of them would respond to the gospel tomorrow if we simply took it to them? How many would readily submit to Christ? Perhaps your friends are different than mine, but among my friends, only a few are close to the kingdom. Many more need additional preparation.

Good News!--Every Christian Can Have a Part in Sharing the Gospel

Our ineffectiveness in touching the world with the gospel is due in part to our limited view of evangelism. Evangelism is a process, not a singular event.

The good news of this truth is that the average Christian in our churches can enjoy a lifetime of personal fulfillment in the process of evangelism when properly understood. Evangelism must occur naturally; evangelism must not be limited to reaping.

Churches must recognize that swelling is not necessarily healthy growth. In fact, if our physical body begins to swell, we usually consider it a sign of ill health. Increased numbers through membership transfers may be a blessing (or may be a curse), but are not a sign of real growth.

I have frequently asked my audience to consider three questions and have asked for a show of hands. Question #1: How many of you were Christians before you came to this church? Question #2: How many of you became Christians in this church, but grew up in this church, i.e. your parents were members? Question #3: How many of you became Christians in this church and had no previous connection with Christianity? I have never found a church with a significant number of #3s.

We are not reaching our world with the gospel of Christ, but we can, because the gospel is still God's power. The problem is not in the message, but in the lack of communication. In cultural pluralism, the bridges over which the gospel travels are not naturally existing, so they must be built. Communication must be carefully cultivated, always checked. At least 1/2 of the American population does not use Christianity as a basis for their personal philosophy that guides their lives every day. Such may indicate a religious preference for Christianity, but their actual discipleship is minimal.

Conclusion

I am concerned that so much of the world's unreached population is not within the normal evangelistic range of any local congregation. World missions is a pressing concern.

I am equally concerned that so much of our nation's unreached population, although within geographic reach of a local congregation, is not within the evangelistic capacity of any local congregation. Ethnic and social differences can indeed be high barriers, but the greatest barrier we face is the cultural diversity of our day. May we learn from the example of Acts, and take the gospel into Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and unto the uttermost parts of the earth. May we learn from the book of Acts, seeking to insure communication, overcoming discouragement when results are meager, and telling the message again and again, every day, never ceasing, because every day, new souls are prepared, and God will give the increase.

Alternate Conclusion

The text concludes. Acts 13:47, light for the Gentiles, to bring salvation to ends of earth. Acts 26:16ff. This is also our call.

- Be a Servant
- Be a Witness of what you have seen and what I will show.
- I will rescue you
- I am sending you to them
 - to open their eyes
 - to turn them from darkness to light
 - to turn them from the power to Satan to God
 - so they may receive forgiveness of sins

Paul responds, "I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision." I pray we will also respond in obedience to our God. I pray you will respond today to this God, whatever you need. If you have never begun the Christian walk, respond in faith to be immersed for forgiveness of sins. If you are just beginning, cultivate a different lifestyle from world so others can note the difference. If you have been a Christian a long time, throw off the stagnation, and go forth with a song in your heart, and the message of the precious gospel on your lips, so that all might hear, to the uttermost parts of the earth. Ours is a big challenge, but we serve a big God. He will enable us, empower us, strengthen us, and uphold us. You can begin today. Why not resolve, rededicate, renew, to live for that great God as we stand and sing....