

Giving a Reason for Our Hope

by

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Doing Good

When Peter described the ministry of Jesus to Cornelius, the Roman officer, he said, "he went around doing good..." (Ac. 10:38). These good acts must surely have included such things as the turning of water into wine (Jn. 2:1-11), the feeding of the multitude (Mt. 14:15-21//Mk. 6:35-44//Lk. 9:12-17//Jn. 6:5-13), the blessing of the children (Mt. 19:13-14; Mk. 10:13-16; Lk. 18:15-16) and his meals with those who were socially ostracized (Mt. 9:10-13//Mk. 2:15-17; Mt. 11:19). Doing good prepares the way for the message about the kingdom of God. The effectiveness of the Christian witness in the world often depends upon such pre-evangelism. The Christian witness cannot be like a mugging, a hit and run attack with the gospel. Rather, it should arise naturally out of the goodness of those who bear the testimony. The goodness of the message is plausible against the background of the goodness of the messenger.

Jesus taught this principle clearly in his Sermon on the Mount. He challenged his followers to be "salt" and "light" in the world (Mt. 5:13-16; cf. Mk. 9:50). While much has been written about the meaning of these metaphors, surely the most obvious meaning is what Jesus himself explained, that is, that being "salt" and "light" is to live a life of goodness so they "may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven." Such goodness is especially to be shown toward those who are not already part of the believing community. If goodness is shown only to those already in the community of faith, what is the merit (Mt. 5:43-48//Lk. 6:27-36)? Acts of goodness should be performed for the sole benefit of the recipient, not for any secondary merit in the eyes of others (Mt. 6:1-4).

The New Testament's testimony about exemplary Christians was that they were "good" people. Tabitha of Joppa "was always doing good" (Ac. 9:36). Barnabas was "a good man" (Ac. 11:24). The character of the godly woman is demonstrated by her good deeds (1 Ti. 2:10; 5:10). Such goodness is especially important for spouses who have unbelieving husbands (1 Pe. 3:1-4). It is equally important when outsiders slander Christianity (1 Pe. 2:15; 3:13-17; 4:19). Christians who have means are taught to be "rich in good deeds, generous and willing to share" (1 Ti. 6:18-19). Paul teaches that eternal life is for those who show "persistence in doing good" (Ro. 2:7, 10; Ep. 6:8). This does not mean that salvation is given as earned merit because of good deeds, but it certainly means that salvation issues forth in a life of goodness, else the claim of salvation is suspect (Ep. 2:10; Tit. 2:14; Ja. 2:14-18). Such attitudes and behaviors are "for the good of many, so that they may be saved" (1 Co. 10:24, 33; 1 Pe. 2:12).

In the end, it is God's goodness that leads people to repentance (Ro. 2:4). So, if

God scatters his gifts abroad, he expects his children to "abound in every good work," also (2 Co. 9:8-9; Ja. 3:13). Such goodness is to be done for all people, though especially for those who are believers (Ga. 6:9-10). Leaders should lead by example (Tit. 2:7), and following their lead, Christians should be devoted to a life of goodness (Tit. 3:1-2, 8, 14).

Discussion Questions

1. What are some practical ways to do good deeds in order to bring glory to God?
2. How is the goodness of Christians to be connected to the goodness of God? How is God good, and what are the implications for us?
3. What does the Bible's teaching about goodness seem to say with regard to the evangelistic methods that Christians use? Assess some of these methods (i.e., TV evangelism, literature, crusades, personal encounter, etc.).
4. How does a consumer culture enhance or diminish the relationship between good works and evangelism?

The Message and the Commission

The central message of Jesus was the coming of the kingdom of God (Mk. 1:14-15; Mt. 4:17, 23-25; Lk. 4:43). The kingdom or reign of God had begun in Jesus' power over Satan (Lk. 11:20-22). The followers of Jesus were to announce this message in their travels (Mt. 10:7; Lk. 10:9).

In a variety of metaphors, Jesus described the new community of faith which he was gathering around himself. The nucleus was the twelve apostles (Mk. 3:13-19). This new people of God was described as the flock (Lk. 12:32) which was being gathered (Mt. 12:30; Jn. 10:7, 9) and for which the shepherd would gladly lay down his life (Jn. 10:11, 14-15, 17-18). Significantly, this flock would be composed of more than merely Jewish sheep (Jn. 10:16). The new community was like a throng of wedding guests (Mk. 2:19), and not everyone who expected to be part of the community would be accepted (Mt. 7:21-23; 25:1-13).

Furthermore, Jesus explicitly indicated that the nations would share in the reign of God. All nations would stand before the Son of Man in the great judgment, and some of them would be saved (Mt. 25:31-34). The mission of the new community of Jesus was a universal one. This universality is directly stated in the post-Easter words of Jesus, often referred to as "the great commission."

Each of the four gospels and the Acts contain a form of the great commission, and while none of them are identical, they all agree in substance. In Matthew 28:18-20, at a mountain in Galilee (28:16), Jesus directed his eleven apostles to make disciples of all nations. This discipling of the nations would include the initiatory rite of water baptism, which embodies the meaning of the gospel in symbolic form, and

the careful teaching of the words of Jesus. In Mark 16:15-16, in the collection of Jesus' post-resurrection appearances that appear in the longer ending of Mark's gospel, there is a similar instruction to the eleven apostles to go into the whole world and proclaim the good news. The appropriate response is faith and baptism. In Luke 24:46-48, again to the eleven apostles (although in this case there were others present also, cf. 24:33), Jesus instructed them that repentance and forgiveness was to be preached to all the nations. Power would be given to his witnesses to perform their mission (24:49). John's version of the commission seems to have occurred on the evening of resurrection day (20:21). The sending of the Son into the world by God the Father becomes the pattern for the apostles, for as the Father sent the Son, so Christ sent his followers. The missionaries were to be empowered by the Holy Spirit (20:22), and their proclamation would result in the forgiveness of sins (20:23). Finally, in Acts 1:8, at the scene of the ascension, Jesus once more instructed his apostles that they were to be witnesses to the ends of the earth after they had received the empowerment of the Holy Spirit.

The Christian church has from the very beginning considered the Great Commission to be its spiritual mission to the world. Some modern interpreters wish to redirect the mission of the church toward political and class liberation, social concern and humanitarianism, but the evangelical church remains firmly committed to the biblical conviction that the only real hope for humanity is in the saving grace of our Lord's death and resurrection, a saving grace that does not merely change things, but that changes people. At the same time, the call to express God's goodness as the ground for evangelism must not be neglected either.

Discussion Questions:

1. After World War I, the so-called Protestant "social gospel" came to replace traditional evangelism in many mainline denominational churches. Evangelicals reacted against the social gospel movement by concentrating almost exclusively on preaching and evangelism. What can both of these expressions learn from each other?
2. How should Jesus' great commission affect the average Christian?
3. How important is missions to the life of the local church? How can the social and evangelical emphases be incorporated into the vision of the local congregation?
4. Is the message of Christianity positive or negative? Why?

Life-style Evangelism

If the commission of Christ to his church is to preach the good news to everyone in the world, surely that must mean we should share the good news in our

own communities. However, in many ways the modern American community has special challenges that make such sharing ineffective. First, part of our American heritage is individualism, which tends to isolate us from others at deep levels. To exacerbate the situation, communications systems and the nature of our urban/suburban culture means that we have too many people to whom we feel obliged to relate. Excessive relational demands drive us to alienation, indifference and the almost desperate grasping for privacy.

Nevertheless, Christ has commissioned his church to be salt and light, to be a participant in announcing the good news of God's saving action through his Son (Phlm 6). Christians should "always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks...to give the reason for the hope they have" (1 Pe. 3:15b). The very context of this statement presupposes that Christians are to *be* good news before they attempt to *share* good news. The Christian lifestyle is to be a letter "written on our hearts, known and read by everybody" (2 Cor. 3:2-3). To be sure, God calls some Christians to the special task of proclamational evangelism (Ep. 4:11; 2 Ti. 1:6-8; 4:5). The apostles, missionaries and evangelists of the early church performed this function. At the same time, Paul seems to have planted congregations in key cities from which the Christian message was spread among the local community by those who lived there (2 Co. 10:15-16; 1 Th. 1:6-8; Col. 1:6-8). How did the early Christians do this? They had no modern means of communication--no media, written literature, radio, mailers, televisions or Tuesday night door-to-door visitation. They had no concept of modern marketing techniques, such as, demographic studies and targeted groups. Instead, they spread of the Christian message from person to person in the ordinary patterns of their lives.

Several New Testament examples provide insight into such lifestyle evangelism. For one thing, the witness of Christian character was paramount, for in all facets of life, the Christian was the ambassador of Jesus Christ (2 Co. 5:20). It was important for Christians to conduct themselves worthy of the gospel and courageous in the face of opposition (Phil. 1:27-28a). Simply things, like refraining from complaints and arguments, meant that believers shone like lights in the darkness (Phil. 2:14-16a). Peter's advice to the Christian woman with a non-Christian husband was that she should behave in such a way that her husband "may be won over without talk" (1 Pe. 3:1-2). In a similar way, Paul advises Christians with non-Christian spouses to live in peace, for as he says, "How do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or, how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?" (1 Co. 7:15-16). Obedience and respect to civil authorities as well as slaves to masters was equally important (1 Pe. 2:13-21). On one occasion, Priscilla and Aquila invited Apollos into their home, where they explained to him the ministry of Jesus (Ac. 18:24-26). Paul advises that if an unbeliever invites a Christian over for a meal, he should go, but Paul also discouraged the practice of "wearing on your sleeve" your

Christian beliefs (1 Co. 10:27-33). Rather, he tried to accommodate himself as far as morally possible so that by all possible means he might win some (1 Co. 9:19-23). The fruit of this approach is evident in Paul's Thessalonian work, where he worked night and day among the Thessalonians at his tent-making trade (2 Th. 3:6-13), and after his honest lifestyle had become the bridge by which to share the gospel, he could say, "You know how we lived among you for your sake" (1 Th. 1:5).

The charity of the early Christians was also noteworthy. When the Jerusalem apostles gave confirmation to Paul's and Barnabas' missionary call, they were careful to point out that they must "remember the poor," the very thing Paul was eager to do (Ga. 2:9-10). So, evangelism was part of the every-day fabric of life for the early Christians. It is in this way that they were salt and light in the world.

Discussion Questions:

1. What would you consider to be some of the biggest hindrances to lifestyle evangelism, and how should you overcome them?
2. How hard is it to "get to know" your neighbors? What can one do to move beyond the "comfort zone" of our American tendency toward cocooning?

The Growth of the Jerusalem Church

The nucleus of disciples left after Jesus' ascension waited in Jerusalem for Pentecost. On Pentecost their numbers increased dramatically following a sermon by Peter who with the other apostles preached the good news about Jesus (Ac. 2:14, 41).

Within a short period of time, the preaching of Peter and John caused the number to grow from 3000 to 5000 (Ac. 4:1-4). While the entire church was involved in witnessing to God's good news through the power of the Holy Spirit (Ac. 4:31), the apostles who were especially effective in preaching (Ac. 4:33; 5:18-20). A popular place for such preaching was Solomon's Colonnade in the temple (Ac. 3:11; 5:12, 20-21, 25), and many people gathered there to hear the apostles and to bring their sick for healing (Ac. 5:13-16). Though challenged by the Sanhedrin, the apostles continued to teach in both the temple courts and in homes (Ac. 5:41-42). Steadily the number of believers grew (Ac. 6:7).

With Stephen's martyrdom, the leaders of the Hellenistic Jewish Christians were scattered toward the nearby rural areas (Ac. 6:5-6; 8:1). Those who fled took their cue from the apostles and continued to share the good news wherever they went (Ac. 8:4). These Hellenistic Jewish leaders began to form Christian communities in uncharted territories, such as Samaria (Ac. 8:5). An African chancellor, probably either a proselyte or a God-fearer, embraced the faith after hearing Philip's explanation, and he continued homeward toward Ethiopia (Ac. 8:27, 36-39). Philip continued to preach the gospel, heading north along the coastal road and preaching in

the cities through which he passed (Ac. 8:40). In time, groups of Palestinian Jewish Christians were to be found in Damascus (Ac. 9:1-2, 19), Lydda (Ac. 9:32), Sharon (Ac. 9:35), Joppa (Ac. 9:42-43), Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch (Ac. 11:19). It was the Hellenistic Jewish leaders who first crossed the religious boundaries of Judaism in order to preach the gospel to non-Jewish groups (Ac. 11:20-21). Barnabas, a native of Cyprus (Ac. 4:36), was sent to Antioch to investigate (Ac. 11:22-23), and he, too, began to preach in this new field (Ac. 11:24). The Christian groups continued to grow steadily throughout Palestine (Ac. 12:24).

Paul's Strategy of Church Planting

Paul seems to have been concerned with strategic provinces as critical footholds of the spread of the gospel. On his first journey, Paul evangelized in Cyprus (Ac. 13:4-6), Pisidia (Ac. 13:14), south Galatia (Ac. 14:1, 6-7), and Pamphylia (Ac. 14:24-25). On his second, Paul visited several established churches in Syria, Cilicia and south Galatia in order to deliver to them the encyclical of the Jerusalem council (Ac. 15:40-41; 16:1, 4-6a). Ending up at Troas on the Aegean coast, he received a vision to embark for Macedonia (Ac. 16:9-10). After planting churches there, he traveled south to Achaia (Ac. 17:15), from where he sailed for home (Ac. 18:18).

In all these travels, Paul seems to have believed that the effectiveness of his preaching was directly related to God's will for him in particular times and places (1 Co. 16:7-9; 2 Co. 2:12-13; Col. 4:3-4; Ep. 6:19-20). His desire to turn east toward Asia and Bithynia was not realized due to divine intervention (Ac. 16:6b-7). His church planting in Macedonia was due to a vision (Ac. 16:9-10). Though there seems to have been an open door at Ephesus, he declined to stay, only promising to return "if it is God's will" (Ac. 18:19-21).

On the third journey, Paul revisited his various congregations, ultimately hoping to be able to go to Rome (Ac. 18:23; 19:1, 21-22; 20:1-6). After strengthening the churches in these established areas, he asserted that he had "fully proclaimed the gospel" so that there was "no more place for me to work in these regions" (Ro. 15:19, 23; cf. Ac. 19:10). His desire to visit Rome was not so much to evangelize there as to find a base from which to go further west toward Spain, areas as yet unevangelized (Ro. 15:20-22, 23-24).

Several things may be observed about Paul's church planting. First, his work focused upon strategic provincial footholds within the limits of Roman administration. Second, he did not preach in every place personally, but he established centers of Christian life in a number of important cities from which the gospel might be spread into the surrounding country (2 Co. 10:15-16; 1 Th. 1:6-8; Col. 1:6-8). Third, all of the cities and towns in which Paul planted churches were

centers of Roman administration, Greek civilization, Jewish influence and commercial importance. These factors combine to give the impression that Paul approached his missionary work in something other than a haphazard way. It would seem that Paul was concerned to establish congregations in key areas which in turn would disseminate the Christian message to adjacent areas.

Discussion Questions:

1. How do Paul's missionary methods compare with ours?
2. How does the contemporary plethora of Christian denominations affect missions work?

The Question of Individual Responsibility

In concluding this short series, one must address what may prove to be a most difficult and controversial question. Exactly what is the responsibility of the individual believer in regard to the Great Commission? It may be granted that the Great Commission is the spiritual mission of the church. It may be granted that God has called special individuals to do the work of evangelism (cf. 2 Ti. 1:6-8; 4:5). It may be noted that leaders other than apostles were actively involved in the proclamation of the good news about Jesus (Ac. 8:4). Does this mean, then, that every believer ought to be a salesperson, that is, that every believer ought to aggressively take the initiative to verbally challenge as many as he or she meets with the message of salvation? Such an assumption is not uncommon in evangelicalism. Well respected evangelical author Michael Green states, "Every man and woman [in the early church] saw it as his task to bear witness to Jesus Christ by every means at his or her disposal." Is such a statement historically true? Is it substantiated by the New Testament and by church history?

Part of the reason for raising this question is the frequent practice in fundamentalist churches of guilt-building as a motive for evangelism. Christians not infrequently are urged to become aggressive one-on-one witnesses, to participate in "every believer is a soul-winner" campaigns, and to consider themselves to be individually responsible for the salvation of the whole world. Part of the reason for raising this question is also the tacit acceptance by many evangelicals that conversions depend upon salesmanship and techniquism, a posture that has its roots in extreme Arminianism (belief that the human will is sufficient means to accept Christ) and the American way of life more than in the Bible. Not a few Christians have suffered severe depression because their personalities did not lend themselves to extroversion, and consequently, their failure at aggressive salesmanship left them to be evaluated as spiritually inferior by their Christian peers, not to mention condemned in their own hearts.

On the other hand, the church *is* responsible to witness to the good news about Jesus within an unregenerate world. The remaining discussion has not so much to do with the mission of the church as with the method of the church. Given that we understand clearly the church's spiritual mission, how did the early church go about accomplishing it and how should we?

A distinction should be made between what can be termed "confrontational evangelism" and "lifestyle evangelism". Confrontational evangelism is the kind which calls upon a believer to take the verbal initiative in sharing the gospel. It is aggressive in character. In this model, one does not testify to Christ because he or she has been asked to do so by an unbeliever, but rather, he or she bluntly confronts the non-believer with the Christian message.

Lifestyle evangelism, on the other hand, seeks to *be* good news before *sharing* good news. The Christian lifestyle itself, shining forth in love and good works, becomes a magnet toward which unbelievers are irresistibly drawn through the leading of the Holy Spirit (Mt. 5:14-16; Jn. 13:34-35; 1 Pe. 2:12). In this attraction, the question of faith will eventually arise, and when it does, the believer is to be prepared with the Christian good news (cf. 1 Pe. 3:1-2, 15-16).

There seems to be scant evidence in the New Testament that the members of the various congregations in Palestine, Asia Minor and Greece were all involved in aggressive evangelism. There is no descriptive narrative by Luke and no urging by Paul or other authors of the New Testament that this should be the task of every believer. Many of the verses that are used to support this kind of approach are rudely pulled from their contexts so that they are made to serve ideas for which they were not created. Unfortunately, the popular ideology that confrontational evangelism is for everyone has burdened so many believers whose personalities were not suited to such tactics that they have withdrawn from evangelism altogether. No one likes to be mugged, and to their deep chagrin, many Christians have become aware that they have themselves been the muggers--evangelical muggers, perhaps, but muggers just the same.

Confrontational evangelism in the New Testament seems to have been for those whom God called to it, persons whom the churches recognized as being gifted in this way. It included apostles, such as Paul and Barnabas, as well as others who served as missionaries. There is no direct evidence that it was practiced or even intended to be practiced by all believers.

It would seem that even Paul, perhaps the greatest of the New Testament missionaries, was selective in his evangelistic efforts. If one traces the geographical progress of his journeys, it will immediately be observed that he did not preach in every city through which he passed, and as was observed earlier, was even prohibited by God from going into some provinces. The notion that every New Testament

believer considered every non-believer to be an immediate target for aggressive evangelism seems to be an overstatement of the case. Timing and the inner urging of the Holy Spirit seem to be significant factors in the sharing of the gospel. So, too, is the sovereign working of God, for no one can come to true faith in Christ unless the Father draws him or her (Jn. 6:44).

The primary responsibility for all believers is for them to be Christians--to be like Jesus Christ (Ac. 11:26b; 2 Co. 3:18). If believers in the church would give their efforts more toward being the Christians into which Christ would like to mold them, they would have to spend less time on learning techniques of salesmanship with which to share the good news. Their very lives would be letters read by all, including the unbelieving community (2 Co. 3:2-3). To be sure, the church must not forget that God calls special persons to perform the task of proclamational evangelism. These persons may be either preachers or lay-persons. However, he has called all believers to be Christians. Christ has called for his followers to be "in" the world but not "of" it. Christians are sometimes "of" the world because they rely on its techniques, and they are not truly "in" it because they have formed themselves into an isolated subculture which is out of touch with the non-Christian world. To the contrary, Christ was in the world, full of grace and truth (Jn. 1:14). And while he was in the world, he ate with tax-collectors and sinners (Mt. 9:10-13). Even Paul encouraged his converts to be involved in the building of positive relationships with unbelievers without necessarily urging them toward aggressive evangelism (1 Co. 10:27-30).

Discussion Questions:

1. How has your experience in various Christian churches affected your views on evangelism--and more importantly, your practice of evangelism?
2. Why do you think many churches leave evangelism to the pastors, and do you think this is a good idea?