

Lessons in Evangelism (Acts 5:12-42)

Sunday 16 July 2000 AM

Leighton Ford was an incredibly gifted evangelist. On one occasion, he was involved in a massive open air crusade in Nova Scotia. He was to speak on the first night and then Billy Graham would speak on the second night. Billy Graham arrived a day early and decided to go along to the rally incognito. He sat at the back of the crowd and because of his hat and dark glasses, no-one recognised him. Directly in front of him sat an elderly gentleman who seemed to be listening intently to Ford's presentation. When he invited people to come forward as an open sign of commitment, Billy decided to do a little personal evangelism. He tapped the man on the shoulder and asked, "Would you like to accept Christ? I'll be glad to walk down with you if you want to." The old man looked him up and down, thought it over for a moment, and then said, "Naw, I think I'll just wait till the big gun comes tomorrow night." Commenting on this incident, Leighton Ford writes *Billy and I have had several good chuckles over that incident. Unfortunately, it underlines how, in the minds of many people, evangelism is the task of the "Big Guns," not the "little shots."*

I wonder if that's a bit how you have been feeling as we have been looking at the Book of Acts. Maybe you've been thinking that Peter and John and the other apostles were the *big guns*, but we can't expect God to work through us in the same way. This is the lie of the devil. He is the only one who want us to read the Book of Acts with those lenses on. He is the only one who want Acts to be a downer, rather than a motivator and an encourager for what God might do through you and me as individuals, but especially through us as a church TODAY. The simple fact is that Peter and John are not around today, but WE are. And God wants to ACT through you and me today just as He acted through them 2,000 years ago. Throughout history, God has always had a church and generation after generation, one group of believers after another. And in this sense, we are in the line of the early of the church.

If we want God to work through us, we must have the same priority as the early church. Widespread confusion exists over what that primary mission should be. Some argue that the church should lead the crusade for social justice for the poor and downtrodden, others see it as a political force to help change the culture, still others view their church as a private club where they can socialise with their friends.

While these are not wrong in themselves, they are not the primary goals for the church to pursue. Indeed, even among the five purposes that we have identified, four could be done better in heaven than here. And it is the goal that can only be done on earth that is our primary goal. Worship is vital, fellowship is critical, discipleship is imperative and ministry is essential. However we will continue with these in heaven and they will be far better. The only purpose that can ONLY be accomplished on earth is the purpose of *evangelism*. And this why it is the *primary* goal of the church in all generations. We are to continue Jesus' mission which was to *seek and save the lost*. The zeal of the early church for evangelism led to explosive growth. On the day of Pentecost, 3,000 souls were added to the church and by the time of Peter's second sermon, there were 5,000 men who believed. And as we will see in the weeks to come, this growth continues as the church expands outward from Jerusalem to Judea and to the remotest

parts of the earth.

The early church not only teach us *what* the primary goal of the church is, but it is also tells us *how* evangelism is to be practised. Obviously, our methods may change in different generations, but the *apostolic principles* are here for us to learn from and apply in our own situations.

Today we come to Acts 5:12-42 and we are going to see seven key *apostolic principles* in evangelism. This passage is crammed full of evangelistic activity in the midst of incredible opposition. V.14; v.20; v.28- filled Jerusalem with this teaching; vv.30-32- evangelistic message; vv.42.

1. ***Successful Evangelism occurs where the church is pure (12-14)***

Imagine the scene. Two people in the church have just died because the pastor announced they were claiming to be giving more than they actually were and even worse than that, the pastor has made it clear that the reason they died was that God has judged them for their sin. You are about to embark on an evangelistic campaign. What would you be tempted to do? Play it down. Keep it quiet.

What we see here in verses 13 and 14 is that three things were going on. Firstly, unbelievers were afraid to associate with them. The news about Ananias and Sapphira would have quickly leaked out and *the rest*, that's the unbelievers, the unchurched if you prefer, were scared to associate with them. The second thing was that among the general populace, the believers were held in high esteem. The fact that the church was holy and pure and the people's response of fear did not stop them from respecting the church, in fact it led to a real and genuine esteem. Thirdly, we find that many- multitudes- were coming to faith. This dynamic of a pure church leading to fear and respect, far from being a turn off or a barrier to evangelism was in fact something that attracted people to Jesus in vast numbers.

And the lesson is simple. *The church of Jesus Christ does not have to lower it's standards in order to win the lost.* In our evangelistic preaching and sharing, we need not hide certain truths from people because we are worried that they might be thought unpleasant. In particular, it is vital that in our evangelism, we make it clear that people come to Jesus both as Saviour and LORD. To be a Christian is to both believe and REPENT. It is to turn from a life of selfishness and impurity and to join a community that seeks to live pure, holy, godly lives.

Ajith Fernando who is the leader of Youth for Christ in Sri Lanka writes *the most common objection to Christianity among the Buddhists of Sri Lanka is that we have a cheap religion. Christians, they say, can live any life of impurity and then receive forgiveness and happily go back to their impure life.* I believe it is the same here. It would be a help and not a hindrance to our evangelism if people thought of the church and responded with a mixture of fear and esteem. People would be drawn, not out of curiosity, but out of a genuine desire to discover what is different about us, out of a genuine desire to find the God who has changed and blessed us.

2. *Successful Evangelism occurs where the Spirit is working (15-16)*

Not only did the purity of the early church attract true seekers after God, so too did the clear expression of God working through the church. The rich with their cots and the poor with their pallets all came to the apostles seeking healing. They believed that even if Peter's shadow would fall upon them they might be healed. There must have been an incredible sense that God was at work through these people.

Now of course, God still uses healing and other miraculous signs and wonders to help people come to faith. However it would be wrong to see this as the only way that the Spirit works in the life of a church in such a way as to draw people. As already mentioned, if people see the Spirit producing a supernatural purity, a supernatural love, if the fruit of the Holy Spirit are manifest in you, then people will sit up and take note.

One of the great opportunities we have just now is to tap into the real interest that people have in spirituality. Sadly, many believe the last place they will find the supernatural or the spiritual is the church. In our lives and in our language, we have the opportunity to speak of the Holy Spirit and the difference He has made in the depth of our beings. When people begin to see the Spirit working powerfully in the lives of believers and in the church, it will lead them to ask what is going on and a door for the gospel will open up.

3. *Successful Evangelism occurs where the gospel is spoken (17-32)*

vv.17-20: here we see that the angelic visitor frees them, not so that they don't have to stand trial, but to intensify the situation. They were put in prison for speaking the gospel and the angel frees them. I think God did this partly to still the hearts of the apostles- He was telling them clearly that they WERE in His will and He would continue to be with them throughout their trial. But also, it brings the real issue into sharp focus. The apostles were speaking the message of Life and the authorities didn't like it. It made them jealous as the attention was off them and on this Man Jesus and His apostles, their theology was being decisively disproved and their position was at risk- the Romans wouldn't like this new sect. The issue at stake is vital. Will the apostles continue to speak the gospel?

vv. 21-26: Then with the entire Sanhedrin gathered, waiting on them to be brought, the jailers have to report that they were not there. They had not hidden, they were doing the very thing that they were not supposed to be doing.

vv.27-32: Here in a quite remarkable scene, the high priest puts his finger right on the real issue. The gospel had been spread and all Jerusalem was speaking of it and it was becoming increasingly clear that Jesus had been wrongly condemned by the Sanhedrin. However, it is Peter's response to the charge that is particularly amazing. He speaks the gospel, he does the very thing that they are trying to stop him doing right there in the courtroom. He doesn't speak of his religious liberty or his human rights, he speaks the gospel. Here is a very clear statement of the basics of the Christian message:

- **God raised up Jesus as Messiah:** the NIV has added the words from the dead, but it is more natural to read Peter's words chronologically. The first truth of the

gospel is that God raised up Jesus to be the Christ, the One promised in OT prophecy, the Redeemer, the Great Deliverer who was to come.

- **The death of Jesus on a wooden cross:** the second key element of the gospel is that Jesus died on a cross. This is a reference back to Deuteronomy 21:23 which pronounces a curse of the one who hangs on a tree. The apostle Paul drew out the real significance of this in Galatians 3:9-14. The essence of this, then is that I was cursed, destined for a lost eternity, but Jesus became a curse for me by hanging on a tree. The cross, then, was the place of *substitution*. Jesus Christ became accursed, separated from God so that I might be free from the curse and united forever with God. This is at the heart of the gospel. It is another way of saying that Jesus, on the cross, took my sins and the punishment for them, so that I might be freed from the penalty of my sin.
- **Resurrection and exaltation:** the third key element of the gospel is that Jesus rose from the dead and has now been exalted to the right hand of God in heaven from where He reigns and intercedes for His people. However much the authorities wanted to drag Jesus down, God has raised Him up to the highest place.
- **The offer of forgiveness:** the fourth element of the gospel message is the offer of forgiveness. The Lord Jesus from heaven grants both forgiveness and repentance to those who respond to the gospel with faith. This offer is open to all, even those who Peter was speaking to here, the very ones who conspired to have Jesus put to death. Such is the grace and mercy of God.
- **Successful evangelism only happens when the truth of the gospel is spoken.** The two main groups represented on the Sanhedrin were the Saducees and the Pharisees. And these two systems of belief represent the two main anti-Christian philosophies of today. The Saducees were the rationalists, who didn't believe in the supernatural or the resurrection of the dead or even the sovereignty of God. Today's theological liberals and atheists and others who deny the supernatural and ongoing intervention of God in His world fall into this camp. The Pharisees were the ritualists, who taught that we could reach God by what WE did. All religions and sects and even those not particularly religious folk who say *I'm a good person- God will let me into His heaven* fall into this category.

Successful evangelism happens when the truth of the gospel cuts through these errors and shines God's truth into people's hearts. And whatever we do, however worthwhile it is, it is not true evangelism if at some point or another the gospel is not spoken.

4. ***Successful Evangelism occurs where the Lord is LORD (v.29)***

Perhaps the key principle that we can learn is Peter's statement that *we must obey God rather than men*. This is a key principle in relation to evangelism, because in every place and at every time, evangelism, being a witness for Jesus is opposed in some way by some people.

Each word is significant. *God* reminds us that they were a group of people who had moved into a dynamic and living relationship with Almighty God. All other authorities had been swept aside as God had become their God. *Obey* reminds us this was no a God that they patronised or considered or held theories about or defend His existence. *Must* causes us to look on these men and their words with great respect. They are not saying they *ought* to obey, but that they must obey. This is the strongest imperative. This obedience has almost left the realm of the voluntary and has become something mandatory upon them. All men are against us- we must. But you'll be imprisoned- we must. We are determined that you will stop- we must. *We* points us to the truth that these men took this as a personal responsibility, not something that could be passed onto another.

Oh, brothers and sisters in Christ, pray that God would give us this imperative attitude to the evangelistic task. G Campbell Morgan: *the proportion in which the Church and individual members of the Church say we must obey God is the measure in which the old impressions can be made again, the old victories won, the old power known. is the measure in which the old impressions can be made again, the old victories won, the old power known.* When we say these words and mean them opposition has no power and compromise has no hold on us.

5. ***Successful Evangelism occurs where suffering is welcomed (33-41)***

I don't know what you make of Gamaliel. He was certainly highly thought of and turned the whole debate here. In terms of the history of the church, we can thank God for him. Without his input the church may well have lost its leading lights at this critical stage.

However, his contribution was mixed. As a Pharisee, he believed in the sovereignty of God. But he took this too far by suggesting that whether a group is successful or not will determine its legitimacy. But whatever we make of him, the result of his intervention was that the apostles were flogged instead of killed. They probably received the 39 lashes and it would have been a serious thing. And yet we are told that they went *rejoicing*.

Here we see a wonderful example of the apostle's desire to see God be glorified in evangelism. What mattered was not their physical comfort or their emotional well-being, what mattered above anything else was that God received the glory. We have lost sight of this reality. Everything we do is for the glory of God. We were created to give God glory. We were redeemed to give God glory. Heaven will have at its centre the giving of glory to God. And the apostles saw in their suffering another opportunity to give glory to God through their shame.

Iranian Christian leader Medhi Dibaj spent nine years in prison for his faith and was murdered in 1994 just six months after his release. One of his prison guards once asked him *does Jesus Christ know that He has someone in this prison who loves Him?* He replied *Jesus Christ our Lord has millions of people who love Him and who wish to sacrifice their lives for Him. I wish I was one of them.* After relating this, Dibaj wrote

How sweet it will be if one day my life is sacrificed for Him.

You see the early church welcomed suffering because for them the gospel of Christ and the honour of His name was of more importance than their physical comfort. It's not that they didn't feel bad or ashamed or feel wronged, but when they thought of the reason for their suffering, joy got the upper hand. O, Lord, give us a passion for YOUR honour. As JTB said *He must increase and I must decrease*. May we understand and apply this in our lives.

6. ***Successful Evangelism occurs where the church is persistent (42a)***

The sixth abiding lesson is that evangelism is to be a lifestyle. It was a natural thing. It wasn't that they had great meetings, although they did, but they spoke with the people they came into contact with on a regular basis. David Goodyear is coming to spend 50% of his time encouraging you and me in evangelism. One of the reasons that we called David was because he has a passion for enabling US rather than seeking to do it all himself. Pray for David and Alison as they prepare to come and pray that God would use David to help all of us to make evangelism part of our lifestyle.

7. ***Successful Evangelism occurs where people are challenged (42b)***

As we already said, successful evangelism requires teaching the truths of Jesus the Christ, but it also includes preaching which means calling on people to respond, calling on people to receive Christ for themselves. You can have an intellectual debate with someone about the Christian faith, but it is not real and full evangelism if you do not also challenge that person or give that person an opportunity to come to Jesus himself.

Different ways: confrontational, tell your story, invite to a service, alpha course, special event, getting alongside until the opportunity comes.

J.I. Packer: *How then should evangelism be defined? The N.T. answer is very simple. According to the N.T., evangelism is just preaching the gospel, the evangel. Evangelizing, therefore is not simply a matter of teaching, and instructing, and imparting information to the mind. There is more to it than that. Evangelism includes the endeavour to elicit a response to the truth taught. It is communication with a view to conversion. It is a matter, not merely of informing, but also of inviting.*

Conclusion

The following article is based on a sermon by missionary Del Tarr who served fourteen years in West Africa with another mission agency. His story points out the price some people pay to sow the seed of the gospel in hard soil.

I was always perplexed by Psalm 126 until I went to the Sahel, that vast stretch of savanna more than four thousand miles wide just under the Sahara Desert. In the Sahel, all the moisture comes in a four month period: May, June, July, and August. After that, not a drop of rain falls for eight months. The ground cracks from dryness, and so do your hands and feet. The winds of the Sahara pick up the dust and throw it thousands of feet into the air. It then comes slowly drifting across West Africa as a fine grit. It gets inside your mouth. It gets inside your watch and stops it. The year's food, of course, must all be grown in those four months. People grow sorghum or milo in small fields.

October and November...these are beautiful months. The granaries are full -- the harvest has come. People sing and dance. They eat two meals a day. The sorghum is ground between two stones to make flour and then a mush with the consistency of yesterday's Cream of Wheat. The sticky mush is eaten hot; they roll it into little balls between their fingers, drop it into a bit of sauce and then pop it into their mouths. The meal lies heavy on their stomachs so they can sleep.

December comes, and the granaries start to recede. Many families omit the morning meal. Certainly by January not one family in fifty is still eating two meals a day. By February, the evening meal diminishes. The meal shrinks even more during March and children succumb to sickness. You don't stay well on half a meal a day. April is the month that haunts my memory. In it you hear the babies crying in the twilight. Most of the days are passed with only an evening cup of gruel.

Then, inevitably, it happens. A six-or seven-year-old boy comes running to his father one day with sudden excitement. "Daddy! Daddy! We've got grain!" he shouts. "Son, you know we haven't had grain for weeks." "Yes, we have!" the boy insists. "Out in the hut where we keep the goats -- there's a leather sack hanging up on the wall -- I reached up and put my hand down in there -- Daddy, there's grain in there! Give it to Mommy so she can make flour, and tonight our tummies can sleep!"

The father stands motionless. "Son, we can't do that," he softly explains. "That's next year's seed grain. It's the only thing between us and starvation. We're waiting for the rains, and then we must use it." The rains finally arrive in May, and when they do the young boy watches as his father takes the sack from the wall and does the most unreasonable thing imaginable. Instead of feeding his desperately weakened family, he goes to the field and with tears streaming down his face, he takes the precious seed and throws it away. He scatters it in the dirt! Why? Because he believes in the harvest (*Italics added*).

The seed is his; he owns it. He can do anything with it he wants. The act of sowing it hurts so much that he cries. But as the African pastors say when they preach on Psalm 126, *"Brother and sisters, this is God's law of the harvest. Don't expect to rejoice later on unless you have been willing to sow in tears." And I want to ask you: How much would it cost you to sow in tears? I don't mean just giving God something from your abundance, but finding a way to say, "I believe in the harvest, and therefore I will give what makes no sense. The world would call me unreasonable to do this -- but I must sow regardless, in order that I may someday celebrate with songs of joy*