

Evangelism – What It Is & What It Isn't

What do you think of when you hear the word “evangelism?”

Some of us got together last summer to have discussions around this topic, and we realized it means different things to different people. To some, evangelism is an altar call during worship, or a formula to “witness” to people, or a pamphlet (or tract) you pass to a stranger, or street-preachers yelling things through megaphones, or debates about worldviews, or people who knock on your door to talk about Jesus (and usually won't leave), or pressuring or guiltting someone in order to “save” their soul.

As you can imagine, if we all have such radically different views of evangelism or expectations about what is supposed to come from it, we probably don't participate in it very effectively. In fact, because the understanding of evangelism has changed so much over the years and so many people have been wounded by aggressive forms of it, many churches don't (or won't) talk about it and therefore it languishes on the sidelines of our faith.

But what does the Bible have to say about evangelism? Well, for starters, our English word comes from the Greek *euangelion*. When that gets transliterated into English, the root is spelled *evangel-*, which is the root of our words like “evangelical,” “evangelize,” and “evangelism.” The *evangel* is simply “glad tidings” or some kind of “good news,” and therefore to practice *evangelism* merely means to share some kind of “good news.”

Interestingly, the Bible lists evangelism as a spiritual gift. In Ephesians 4:11-12, the apostle says, “So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up.” He also says in 1 Corinthians 12:29, “Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles?” The implication is that God, through Christ and by the power of his Holy Spirit, gives spiritual gifts to some in the church, but not necessarily the same gifts to all. Therefore, each individual gift is to be used to supplement and build up the greater family of faith. As such, it should not be a surprise that evangelism comes very naturally for some but not as naturally for others.

This shouldn't mean, however, that everyone opts out of evangelism by self-diagnosing that “we don't have the gift.” Instead, there is a very simple example of sharing glad tidings at different capability-levels in the Lukan birth-story of Jesus.

First, we're told an angel appears to some shepherds and says, “Do not be afraid, I bring you good news”—(there's our word)—“that will cause great joy for all the people” (Lk 2:10), then the angel tells them about the birth of Jesus. Next, the shepherds go to see if what they heard was true, then “they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed” (Lk 2:17-18). So, in this very

simple but mysterious story, the ordinary shepherds heard good news, investigated it for themselves, then shared the good news with others.

Perhaps this is an easy enough place to start. Yes, some of us have been blessed with a spiritual gift that we should exercise for the glory of God. But all of us have been given good news in Jesus, we've probably had opportunities to investigate this news for ourselves (and if we haven't, now would be a good time to start!), therefore we can share what we've experienced and learned with others.

There is much more that can and should be said about evangelism, but we'll save some of those conversations for future articles. Until then, have a blessed fall and keep growing in the love of Jesus.

Together in the gospel,

Pastor Chris