

Discipleship 101

a beginner's guide to Christianity

Chapter 30

Sharing the good news

After Jesus had been resurrected and had appeared to his disciples for several weeks, he took them to the Mount of Olives. The disciples asked him, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” (Acts 1:6). In other words, where are we now in the prophetic timetable? Are we near the end?

And Jesus answered, “It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (verses 8-8). In other words, you don't need to know the prophetic timetable. What you need to do is to preach the gospel.

What Jesus said to the disciples is still true: Our place in prophecy is not to calculate dates, but to preach the gospel. We do not need to worry about the *next* phase of God's plan—we need to be diligent about the phase of history we are *currently* in. This is the church age, the gospel-preaching age, and we need to be doing the work he has assigned us.

Evangelism is central to our mission, as described in Jesus' “Great Commission”: “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19-20).

For apostles only?

However, a few people have wondered: “Since it

was the apostles who were commanded to preach the gospel in these verses, how do we know that it applies to us today? Isn't our role just to set a good example, and then give the gospel to people only when they ask about it? The Bible does not actually command us to preach to the public, does it?”

Some might argue that the command is given to the apostles, not to us. True, the command is directed to the apostles. They were commanded to preach the gospel and baptize believers. But there is a bit more to the story.

Let's go back to Matthew 28:19-20. Jesus told his apostles to teach people to obey everything he had commanded them. And one of his commands to them was to preach, and as a result, the apostles taught believers to obey Jesus' command to preach the gospel. In effect, Jesus gave a self-perpetuating command. Future disciples were to carry on the commission. Matthew ended his book with a command that his readers needed to obey.

Verse 20 tells us that Jesus promised, “I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” Jesus did not promise merely to be with the apostles, but with the church throughout the centuries. The commission is likewise applicable to all the church, from the earliest apostles even to the end of the age. The New Testament records the results of Christ being with and motivating apostles and many other believers to preach the gospel.

A word about ‘preach’

Before we look at examples in the New Testament about the church carrying out the

command to preach, let us take a moment to better understand the Greek words usually translated “preach” or “preaching.” Some Christians are put off by the idea that all believers are called on to “preach.” They understand “preaching” as standing up in a group and speaking convincingly and forcefully about the gospel. Naturally, very few people are equipped to do that kind of “preaching,” and do it effectively and responsibly.

But “preach” is only one of the possible ways the Greek words can be translated. One of the words commonly translated “preach” is *euaggelizo*, and it means “to bring or announce good news.” Certainly, the common understanding of “preach” is an important way in which the good news is announced. But that common understanding is certainly not the only way to bring the gospel.

Notice, for example, such passages as Luke 1:19 and 2:10, in which *euaggelizo* is translated “show” or “bring” the good news. Our concept of “preach” needs to expand to include the many other ways the gospel can be given to others. The concept intended with *euaggelizo* is that of a person or persons getting across the message of the good news of the gospel to other people. There are many ways in which that can be done in addition to preaching.

Another word usually translated “preach” is *kerysso*, and this means to herald, to proclaim, to make known. This can be done by public preaching, certainly, but it can be done in other ways too. The word used in Mark 16:15 and translated “preach” is *kerysso*.

Different translations often use different words to translate *kerysso* or *euaggelizo*. For example, in Luke 9:2, the King James Version translates *kerysso* as “preach,” while the New American Standard translates it “proclaim.” In Luke 1:19, the KJV translates *euaggelizo* as “shew thee these glad tidings,” while the NAS translates it as “bring you this good news” and the New International Version has it “tell you this good news.”

Getting the gospel to others, then, is not limited just to popular notions of preaching. On the

contrary, informing others about the grace of God in Jesus Christ can take many, many forms, and all of us are gifted by the Spirit to bring the gospel to others in one way or another.

Evangelism in the early church

Throughout the book of Acts, we see the apostles carrying out Jesus’ commission. They declared that Jesus is the Christ, that he was crucified and raised from the dead, and that salvation is available through him. It was a Christ-centered message, an “evangelistic” or “gospel-oriented” message.

But was the gospel proclaimed by the apostles alone? Certainly not! Stephen did great works in the name of Christ, and argued that Jesus is the Christ (Acts 6:8-10). Before the Sanhedrin, he forcefully argued that Jesus is the Righteous One, the Messiah, predicted in the Scriptures (Acts 7:51-52). And his dying words were a testimony to God’s forgiveness of sins in Christ (verse 60).

God inspired Stephen, and he inspired many others. “On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered.... Those who had been scattered preached the word (*euaggelizo*) wherever they went” (Acts 8:1, 4). Even at risk of their lives, these lay Christians saw to it that the gospel was given to others. They were simply doing what Christians do naturally. They felt compelled—led by the Holy Spirit—to tell others the good news that God had blessed them with. Luke presents the story as a good example for us to follow.

Next, Philip went “to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Christ there” (verse 5). God blessed this evangelism by converting some of the Samaritans. The gospel continued to expand.

“Those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, telling the message only to Jews. Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good

news about the Lord Jesus. The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord" (Acts 11:19-21). Again, God inspired his people to tell the good news about Jesus, and he blessed the results.

Paul was given a special commission as an apostle to the gentiles. But Luke tells us that Paul was not the only one who shared the good news with them. "Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, where they and many others taught and preached the word of the Lord" (Acts 15:34). Clearly, Luke does not think that the commission applied only to the apostles. His book serves as an example of what future generations of the church should do.

Also in the book of Acts, we might note the example of Apollos, who "vigorously refuted the Jews in public debate, proving from the Scriptures that Jesus was the Christ" (Acts 18:28). Later, Paul rejoiced that even more people were preaching Christ (Philippians 1:15-18; *kyrusso* is used in verse 15; *kataggello*, meaning "proclaim," is used in verses 16 and 18).

Paul told Timothy (2 Timothy 4:5) to do the work of an evangelist (*euaggelistes*—a bringer of good news). God gives some of his people a gift for evangelism (Ephesians 4:11). Training can make their gift even more effective. The church could not fulfill its mission if all it ever did was wait for people to come to it. It needs to be intentional about going out in the name of Christ and reaching people with the good news.

Personal evangelism

At one level or another, evangelism involves every member of the church, every disciple of Jesus Christ. As we mature in the faith, each member should become more competent with the Christian message. "By this time you ought to be teachers," Hebrews 5:12 says, implying that anyone who has been a Christian for a while should be able to teach others the good news.

God has given the "message of reconciliation" to

all who are reconciled by Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 5:18-19). We are to encourage other people to be reconciled to God through the gospel of Jesus Christ.

As the church obeys the commands of Christ and we conduct ourselves "in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ" (Philippians 1:27), people will indeed come to us and ask for help. This is evangelism by example, and it adds to rather than replaces our responsibility to preach. We are to do both. Part of our example should be our willingness to give credit to the One who works within us.

We are a holy people, called to "declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light" (1 Peter 2:9). How do we do this? In part, by living "such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us" (verse 12).

It is in the context of setting a good example that Peter writes, "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have" (1 Peter 3:15). Example and evangelism go hand in hand.

In the world today, the Christian way of life stands out. When society is pessimistic and apathetic, the Christian hope and purpose are more noticeable. People need and want the peace of Christ, whether they understand it yet or not. When they ask for help, we can explain in our own words why we have hope in Jesus Christ. A good example and a wise witness to our faith help preach the good news.

Paul encouraged Christians to live "without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe" (Philippians 2:15). But the Christian's role in the community does not stop with avoiding sin. Paul's very next words are "as you hold out the word of life" (verse 16). Their works were combined with their words. Good deeds go with the gospel, and the combination is an effective form of evangelism.

Prepared to give an answer

Each Christian should be able to explain the basics of the faith. Perhaps not in an eloquent way, and certainly not in an argumentative way, but in simple confidence. We know the peace of God in our lives. We know that we will be resurrected. We know that life is worthwhile. We know that our sins are forgiven. We know that God sent his Son to die for us, and that he now lives for us. We know he wants us to stop living for ourselves and start living for him (2 Corinthians 5:15).

Christians can't explain every verse of the Bible, but they can give their own testimony as to why they believe. They can't prove every point with an iron-clad argument, and they don't need to. What makes their testimony believable is their "good behavior in Christ" (1 Peter 3:16). When we give an answer for the hope that lies within us, the evidence is in our works as well as in our words. The two reinforce each other to make each more effective than they would have been on their own.

Not every member is equally gifted at explaining eloquently the grace of God, and not every member will do it in the same way. "Evangelism," in the

sense of continually approaching others with the gospel, is a spiritual gift, and we cannot expect every Christian to have this particular gift. But all Christians are commanded to be ready to give an answer. All of us should want our neighbors to have the blessing of knowing Christ, rather than living in ignorance. All Christians should be ready to be used by God when appropriate situations arise.

Personal evangelism should not be ignored. The Holy Spirit leads each Christian in behavior and in word. That means that each of us should be a good example in the community and be a faithful witness of the faith that lies within us. If you are a more reserved person, if religion is not the first subject you want to bring up, that's OK. Be zealous for Christ in the way God has gifted you—but always be ready to give an answer. Being ready includes eagerness, not just having the right words.

Christ's commission to bring the gospel to others is a continuing part of our work. That is why we are committed to the work of evangelism—this is one of the ways in which we obey Jesus Christ. This is part of our commission, part of our responsibility.

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