

USING YOUR LIFE, STORY, AND CHURCH

We will soon turn our attention to apologetics, which is a key part of evangelism, particularly in our culture. Christianity is far less influential than it once was in our country and we continually see more people who are not only indifferent to the gospel, but who are actually attacking the faith of Christians. I suspect that this will continue. Therefore, we need to learn how to rationally present and defend our faith.

Before we address that subject, however, we should first consider a few more ways of sharing the gospel. We have studied our message, we have discussed ways of sharing it, and we have learned at the feet of Jesus. Now let us consider how we can use our lives, our stories (or testimonies), and our church.

USING YOUR LIFE

Our lives should reflect the gospel to others around us. If we are Christians, we have been changed by God, and that change should be evident. “He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (Col. 1:13-14). Our lives should somehow reveal this change in allegiance.

Our goal in living out the gospel is to glorify God. We should never lose sight of that. Our primary goal should be to please our Father in heaven, not other humans on earth. People may even hate us simply for being Christians, something that Jesus warned his disciples about (John 15:18-19). Paul also taught that some people will think Christians are “a fragrance of death” while other people will think they are “a fragrance of life” (see 2 Cor. 2:15-16). Whether people love us or hate us, the way that we live should be provocative. That is, our lives should provoke people to ask questions and to think.

Jesus called us salt and light (Matt. 5:13-16). We should be people who help preserve life and who point others to the true light of this world, Jesus. Jesus said, “Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 5:16). Peter said something very similar: “Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation” (1 Pet. 2:12). We should never do good deeds to be noticed (for that would reveal something wrong in our hearts), but as we do good deeds out of thankfulness and to please the Father, people should naturally see that we are different.

Mark Dever believes that our lives should be naturally provocative. The Christian life should stir up questions in unbelievers. Dever instructs, “Try to live in a distinctly Christian ‘salty’ way around them—in your words and actions. Make them thirsty. Make your whole life before them provocative. I sometimes introduce myself to people as being a fundamentalist, because I’m hoping there will be an intriguing disconnect between their assumptions of what a

fundamentalist is and what kind of person I seem to be. Live a Christian life before them.”¹

Perhaps Dever had this passage in mind:

⁵ Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time. ⁶ Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person. (Col. 4:5-6)

This passage brings together two important ideas: our lives as lived among unbelievers and the way that we speak to them. According to N. T. Wright, walking in wisdom means walking according to the pattern of Christ, or walking in a manner worthy of the gospel. “Blameless life lays the foundation for gracious witness, as Christians *make the most of every opportunity*.”²

However, making the most of every opportunity includes more than how we live our lives. It requires speech. Right before these two verses, Paul solicits prayer. He asks the Colossians to pray that he would know “how I ought to speak” (v. 4). Paul tells us that our speech should be gracious and salty, so that we may know how we ought to answer each person. This presupposes that people will ask us questions, perhaps because we are “walking in wisdom.” Their questions may also result from our attempts at evangelism. At any rate, we must speak graciously as we answer. (Peter says the same in 1 Peter 3:15, a passage we will look at soon.) “Seasoned with salt” is an interesting phrase. Nearly every commentator believes it refers to speaking in a “spicy” way; that is, our speech shouldn’t be dull and boring. Rather, we should speak in a way that leads to more conversations. David Garland summarizes such an approach: “Christians must leaven a bold, uncompromising witness with civility, gentleness, kindness, and good humor.”³

Salt can also refer to a preservative. When we speak gospel truth to people, that truth can preserve their lives. We must remember to speak the “word of life,” the gospel, to people.

Finally, salt can also mean wisdom, or the appropriate word. We must know how to give people an appropriate response, one that suits the time and place in which we live and the particular person to whom we are speaking.

Peter O’Brien summarizes verse 6 in this manner. “They [the Colossians] are recipients of God’s grace: let that grace be evident in the words they speak. Their conversation ought not to be dull or insipid; instead, they ought to choose the right word as they respond to each non-Christian who asks them questions about either their beliefs or behavior.”⁴

Shining as lights in the world

When Paul wrote to the Philippians, he urged them also to live blameless lives in the world so that they would shine like lights. Philippians 2:14-16 says,

¹ Mark Dever, *The Gospel and Personal Evangelism* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007), 66.

² N. T. Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 157. Italics in original.

³ David E. Garland, *Colossians and Philemon*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998), 285.

⁴ Peter T. O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, Word Biblical Commentary (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982), 244.

¹⁴ Do all things without grumbling or disputing, ¹⁵ that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, ¹⁶ holding fast to the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I may be proud that I did not run in vain or labor in vain.

The call to shine like lights in the world reminds us of Jesus' teaching on the Sermon on the Mount. The Philippians, like all Christians, were surrounded by a "crooked and twisted generation." In other words, they were surrounded by people who did not love, trust, and obey God. In that context, the Philippians were to shine, "holding fast to the word of life." The word of life is the gospel message. The Greek word translated as "holding fast," *epechein*, can also be translated "holding forth." In the context of Philippians, the first option seems to be the best: the Philippians are to hang on to the gospel and defend it. Clinging to the gospel is essential for living a blameless life. But the other possibility, "holding forth," can also be supported. If that is what Paul intended, the passage takes on an evangelistic thrust: the Philippians are supposed to offer the gospel to the unbelievers around them.

I agree with most scholars that the context best supports the first option. But when Christians hold fast to the gospel, they are also in a position to share it, particularly as their lives are different from everyone else's. Alec Motyer believes that if the gospel brings light it is like a lantern. As we Christians walk through the darkness, the gospel lights our way, and we cling to that "lantern." But that same light can be seen by others, and they, too, may want to come to the light to find direction in life.⁵

This passage in Philippians shows us that our lives should be countercultural. The way that we live should be different from the way that unbelievers live. Our lives should be different because we are following Christ, and they are not. (There is no sense, of course, in being different just to be different.) This is not a call to separate ourselves from society, but to live in it in a very different way. The loving acts we perform, the gracious words we speak, how we use our money, the way we do not pursue the idols of the world—all these things should provoke questions.

One aspect that should shine in the darkness is our love for Jesus. Our devotion to him and our affections for him should be clear. Sadly, people who are not Christians often show more outward devotion and emotion for worthless causes, like their favorite sports team, musical group, or television show. In fact, I know that in the past I have shown more enthusiasm for a particular television show than I did for Jesus.

Recently, another pastor shared with me a letter that he had received from a woman. She wanted to thank him for his preaching. She then shared a story about her coworker, an unbeliever who was "evangelizing" for a certain show on TV. This woman got very excited as she spoke of her favorite program. She wanted the first woman to know how great the show

⁵ J. A. Motyer, *The Message of Philippians*, *The Bible Speaks Today* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1984), 133.

was. The Christian woman then reflected on the difference between her coworker's enthusiasm for a fictional story and Christians' enthusiasm for the true story. This is part of her letter:

I began to wonder why Christians at large are not enraptured with Jesus Christ our Sovereign and coming King. I wondered why we do not display even one quarter as much passion when we discuss God's living Word, his eternal promises and what he is doing in our lives. I wondered why there are so few disciples of Christ . . . who long after him with all that they are moment by moment. I wondered why it is so rare for Christians to just sing songs of praise, pray, and discuss with passion God's Word no matter where they are. Where is the passion for our Savior in America? I ended this dialogue with the Lord in repentance and asking him to increase my passion and that of my husband. To bring revival to our churches beginning with me and to give me boldness to witness and to freely share what I believe and Who I love because He first loved me.

If we want to witness to Christ, we have to speak words of truth. We have to know our message. But we have to show that that we love Jesus and that this message has made a profound impact in our lives. Let us show greater devotion to Christ in the way we live, in the way we think, and in the things we desire. When we do this, we are glorifying God, the ultimate goal. And we are also letting people know what the greatest treasure is.

The two great commandments

All of our evangelistic efforts must conform to the two great commandments of the Bible. When Jesus was asked, "Which is the great commandment in the Law?" he answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets" (Matt. 22:37-40). We need to love God primarily, and we must love him with every part of our being. If we are doing that, then we will shine like lights in the world. If we love God that much, we will want to tell others about him.

If we are following the second great commandment, to love our neighbor as we love ourselves, then we will want them to know Jesus. When we love someone, we want the greatest good for that person, and the greatest good for anyone is to have a relationship with Jesus.

If we do not love the people with whom we are sharing the gospel, we are missing something vital. We can have the greatest gospel presentation and the most convincing arguments, but if we don't have love, our efforts will be in vain.

In the midst of a discussion of spiritual gifts, Paul talked about the importance of love. This is what he writes in 1 Corinthians 13:1-3:

¹ If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. ² And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove

mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.³ If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.

Without love, evangelism is like a noisy gong and a clanging cymbal: full of sound and fury and signifying nothing.

USING YOUR STORY

In addition to showing people the power of the gospel through our lives, we can also tell people our story, our testimony. Earlier, I stated that our testimony is not the gospel, and this is true. The heart of the gospel is the objective, factual truth that Jesus died and rose again. In contrast, our experience of this gospel applied to our lives is subjective. This subjective experience of salvation does not save anyone else.

That being said, I believe that telling our story can be an effective way to supplement the gospel message. We might tell our story before we share the gospel, or we might tell our story afterward. Telling our story lets people know that the gospel is not simply news from a distant past. It demonstrates the gospel's power to change lives.

Mack Stiles offers a few tips for sharing your testimony.⁶ They are:

1. **Know what a testimony is for.** Our story should be like a window. A window allows people to see something. People should be able to look through our stories and see Christ. The point of our testimony is to allow people to see Jesus, not ourselves. Our stories are not the end goal. They are only tools to let people see our Savior.
2. **Keep Christ at the center.** This point should be obvious. We should tell our stories so that we are giving Jesus all the credit for the ways we have changed. In other words, our stories can begin with us, but they should lead to Jesus and the gospel message.
3. **Speak truthfully.** Whatever your story is, tell the truth. Don't try to make your story more interesting. Tell the truth about what kind of person you were before Christ. Tell people the truth about how you were saved. For some of us, the process was long and ugly, while others have more dramatic and sudden conversion experiences. Tell people the truth about your Christian life, how God has changed you. Tell people the truth about your current sin struggles. It is important to tell people that we are not perfect. (And it is extremely important to tell people that we were not saved because of our moral performance.)
4. **Know your story, not someone else's.** You are you. You have your own unique story. Perhaps you feel it isn't exciting or ideal. But don't apologize for your story; own it. People come to Christ in many different ways. Your way is one of them.

⁶ J. Mack Stiles, *Speaking of Jesus* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 142-143.

We should always be prepared to shift from our subjective experience of Christ to the objective news about him. We should always put more weight on the content of the gospel, but it is still important to share how God has changed us.

USING YOUR CHURCH

We can also use our church in evangelism. Sometimes our work as evangelists can feel very lonely. We envision ourselves as solitary, gospel-sharing soldiers. However, we should be “striving side by side for the faith of the gospel” (Phil. 1:27).

When I say that we can use our church, I don’t mean that we should only invite people to church services, so that the pastors and teachers can share the gospel. We can and should do that, but that might not be the best first step.

Most unbelievers do not feel comfortable entering into a church. Some even feel threatened. They don’t understand why we do the things we do. This is understandable.

If we want to use the church to evangelize, we can do much more than inviting people to church. If we want our non-Christian friends to get a taste of the Christian life, we could invite them to a gathering of our Christian brothers and sisters. Imagine throwing a party. You invite many of your Christian friends, as well as some unbelieving friends. That way, your friends who are not Christians can see how Christians interact and love each other.

One of the ways that we show that we are Christians is by loving each other. Jesus said, “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:34-35). We first need to love each other. Then we need to let others see that love. As Tim Chester and Steve Timmis write, “It is our cross-love for each other that proclaims the truth of the gospel to a watching and skeptical world.”⁷ When people see how we interact, they may become attracted to our community and lifestyle, well before they become attracted to Jesus and the gospel.

Chester and Timmis believe that evangelism should consist of three strands: building relationships with people we want to reach for Christ, introducing them to the Christian community, and sharing the gospel. “In our experience people are often attracted to the Christian community before they are attracted to the Christian message.”⁸ They believe that those who are not yet Christians should first experience something of the Christian community. They don’t mean in a church service, but in a more informal gathering of Christians. The way that Christians interact should be attractive to them. As Mark Dever said, it should make them thirsty.

Of course, to do this, we need to spend time together as Christians. We also need to have real Christian fellowship, in which we talk about God, our lives, the Bible, and our spiritual struggles. When Christians act as Christians in front of non-Christians, it demonstrates the truth of the gospel. Most people who are not Christians haven’t witnessed true Christianity. “People

⁷ Tim Chester and Steve Timmis, *Total Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 57.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 59.

have rejected the gospel word in part because they have not been exposed to credible gospel community.”⁹

In addition to allowing our unbelieving friends a taste of the Christian community, we can use the church in other ways. When embarking on any endeavor as a church, we should consider our spiritual gifts and natural talents. Some of us are naturally outgoing, able to make friends quickly. Some of us are naturally introverted and shy. Some of us are gifted at teaching and sharing the gospel. Others are good at serving. Each one of us has different hobbies and interests. There is a way that we can make use of all of our gifts and talents, and that is by witnessing to unbelievers as a community.

Let me provide an example. I have a neighbor with whom I want to share the gospel. We have talked several times, but our conversations don’t get past small talk. He is significantly older than me, he’s retired, and he enjoys working outside and working with his hands. I’m younger, I’m still working, and most of my work involves reading, writing, and speaking. We have a few things in common (we first met during a snowstorm when some kids in our neighborhood were riding a snowmobile on our street and we both didn’t like that), but not much. However, I know some older men in the church who likely have more in common with my neighbor. I would be wise to invite those men to my house, along with my neighbor. They may hit it off, and then we might have the opportunity to share the gospel.

Each one of us has something that we can contribute to evangelism. We may be the one who makes friends and is hospitable. We may be the one who serves or who has mercy. Or we may be the one who is more theologically-minded and can share the gospel. But each of us has something to add. When Chester and Timmis write about their evangelism of three strands (building relationships, inviting people into the Christian community, and sharing the gospel), they describe the strengths of such an approach: “One of the practical benefits of the three-strand mode of evangelism is that it gives a role to all of God’s people. . . . It is lovely to think of us making up for one another’s deficiencies with our collective community strengths.”¹⁰

In order to accomplish this three-strand evangelism, we must be willing to make relationships with other people, but we must also let them experience our Christian community. If we are going to show others what Christian community is like, we must first have that community. We must spend time together and we must have distinctly Christian fellowship, the center of which is God. Otherwise, our fellowship is indistinguishable from social clubs and non-Christian communities. Our conversations and the way we treat each other should be distinct from the pattern of the world.

Finally, once we have made a relationship with a person and introduced them to some form of Christian community, we need to share the gospel with that person. This should come more naturally if we have followed the first two steps. Once our non-Christian friend has witnessed Christians in community, he or she may ask what we believe. Our friend may wonder what makes us different. At that time, we can state unapologetically what we believe.

⁹ Ibid., 67.

¹⁰ Ibid., 62.

I will let Mark Dever have the final words of this section:

The people around us are lost in darkness; we have the wonderful and attractive call to live out a new life in our congregations—a good life that reflects the good news. Think about the role of your church in your evangelism. Yes, you can invite people to services and special evangelistic events, but also consider bringing them into your own life, into the network of relationships that is your congregation. That may be to them as a shining star in the dark night of their lives. That may provoke them to do some honest soul searching.¹¹

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

In what ways does your life point to Christ?

Are you “walking in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of your time”? If not, what are some practical ways you could improve in this area?

Is your speech gracious? Salty? How can you always be ready to answer each person?

Is your devotion to Jesus obvious? Do you speak of him naturally and passionately, or does that seem unnatural to you?

What is your story, your testimony? Practice telling your story in a way that points people to Christ and gives him all the credit.

Are you using your church to share the gospel? If not, how could you start doing that?

Imagine ways of introducing your Christian friends to your non-Christian friends. How could you do this?

¹¹ Dever, *The Gospel and Personal Evangelism*, 68.