

Evangelism

I've enjoyed learning to cook. Over the years I've more or less taken over the role of chef in our household. Becoming a good cook starts by simply following the recipes provided by others. After all, why reinvent the wheel, as they say. When following a recipe, you copy it exactly in order to produce the same outcome. There's a formula. With evangelism though, there are some keys to effective evangelism, but not necessarily a formula to follow. Consider the following anecdotal story. An apartment is on fire and a man stands outside and watches as firemen run in and out of the building rescuing people. One fireman has a guy thrown over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. Another fireman has a guy lay across over both of his arms. A third fireman carries a person out piggy-back style. As each fireman runs out carrying another person, the man watching yells, *"You're doing it wrong!"* It's usually those that aren't saving anyone who tend to criticize how people ought to be saved. When it comes to evangelism, there's no single right way to do it.

Evangelism is the activity of sharing your faith with others, in the hopes of converting them. Another word for this is proselytizing. Maybe you've had someone stop you at the mall and ask you, *"Do you have a relationship with Jesus?"* That person is out evangelizing. You might think, *"I've had that happen, and I hate when strangers ask me stuff like that!"* For most, that type of evangelism is not effective. Generally, most Christians tend to evangelize more casually, through relationships that they have with co-workers, friends, neighbors, and relatives. One's faith comes up in conversations as people talk about their struggles or experiences.

Studying the ministry of the Apostle Paul, we see in the book of Acts some of the keys to effective evangelism. Paul had a ministry to both the Gentiles and the Jews. In Acts 16, Paul invites a man named Timothy to be a student of Paul's. Acts 16:1-5 says, ***"Paul came also to Derbe and to Lystra. And a disciple was there, named Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer, but his father was a Greek, and he was well spoken of by the brethren who were in Lystra and Iconium. Paul wanted this man to go with him; and he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in those parts, for they all knew that his father was a Greek. Now while they were passing through the cities, they were delivering the decrees which had been decided upon by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem, for them to observe. So the churches were being strengthened in the faith, and were increasing in number daily."***

Timothy's faith ties to his mom's side (2 Timothy 1:5); his grandmother Lois, and mother Eunice are Christians, ***"but his father was a Greek."*** This statement implies that either Timothy's dad was not a Christian, or was possibly a *"proselyte of the gate,"* a term given to Gentiles who turn from idols and embrace Judaism and its many customs, but forgo full conversion to Judaism; particularly dismissing circumcision. The fact that Timothy wasn't circumcised was evidence that the father wasn't circumcised. Before Eunice (Timothy's mom) came to faith in Jesus, as a Jewish woman she couldn't have taken Timothy to be circumcised, as no female Jew could have her son circumcised without the husband.

Consider Paul's odd timing to have Timothy circumcised. The passage reads, ***"Paul wanted this man (Timothy) to go with him; and he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in those parts, for they all knew that his father was a Greek."*** They were traveling through Gentile cities, but Jews had settled ***"in those parts"*** as well. So, in order to be able to enter the synagogues and evangelize effectively to the Jews, Paul (who was circumcised) had Timothy circumcised. Socially, it was still an abomination for circumcised Jews to socialize and eat with the uncircumcised. So, Paul makes this accommodation with Timothy in order to pacify the unsaved Jews, so as to win the opportunity to evangelize them. Timothy's circumcision did not violate any truth claim, nor did it contradict any gospel teaching. In other words, it was strictly a cultural concession, not at all reflecting that circumcision had any spiritual relevance. Paul lived by the principles that

if it doesn't violate a truth claim or compromise the gospel in any way, then he'll do it. Paul talks about this in 1 Corinthians 9:20, ***"To the Jews I became as a Jew, so that I might win Jews."*** So, a significant evangelistic key is to show those you're ministering to, that, who they are matters.

Moving ahead in Acts 16:6-10, Luke, the author of Acts, writes, ***"They passed through the Phrygian and Galatian region, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia; and after they came to Mysia, they were trying to go into Bithynia, and the Spirit of Jesus did not permit them; and passing by Mysia, they came down to Troas. A vision appeared to Paul in the night: a man of Macedonia was standing and appealing to him, and saying, 'Come over to Macedonia and help us.' When he had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them."*** Three times in these verses Luke mentions that God is leading them; 1) ***"forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia"***, 2) ***"trying to go into Bithynia, and the Spirit of Jesus did not permit them"***, 3) ***"A vision appeared to Paul in the night...God had called us to preach the gospel to them."*** Effective evangelism is the result of partnering with the Holy Spirit; being able to be interrupted and directed by God. So, another evangelism key is, where and when we evangelize, is the result of letting God lead. While Christians are told to go to all the world, there are instructions as to when and where.

On a side note, why didn't God permit evangelism in some of the places that Paul intended to go? For instance, why was Asia forbidden? It's not that the Asian continent was forbidden, nor Asia-Minor either, but only its western areas, as ruled by Rome. The reasons are not provided; perhaps people there weren't ready to receive the gospel, as they appear to be later in Acts 19:10, ***"all who lived in Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks."***

Fast forward, Paul and his traveling companions have arrived in Philippi. On the Sabbath (the Jewish Sabbath, Saturday), they went looking for Jews to evangelize to. Acts 16:13, ***"And on the Sabbath day we went outside the gate to a riverside, where we were supposing that there would be a place of prayer; and we sat down and began speaking to the women who had assembled."*** Philippi was a Roman occupied city. Jews had settled there, but not many. In fact, the Jewish custom was that if 10 adult male Jews lived in a city, then a synagogue was built. So, the fact that Paul, ***"went outside the gate to a riverside...supposing that there would be a place of prayer,"*** indicates that no synagogue was built in the town. Jews traditionally worship at a distance from pagans, so as no synagogue was available, any Jews would assemble ***"outside the gate"*** of the city to gather for prayer elsewhere. Paul wisely exited the city and found Jews convened by the ***"riverside."*** No synagogue meant little to no Jewish men, and as such, Paul evangelized ***"to the women who had assembled."***

Consider Paul's past role as a high-ranking Pharisee, and all of the prejudices that Pharisees were required to believe in and to pray about. For example, Pharisees prayed a daily prayer like, ***"God, I thank you that I am not a Gentile, or a slave, or a woman."*** God never taught the Jews to pray these pathetic prayers, but the bigoted hearts of the religious Pharisees prayed these things all the time. Praise the Lord for how sharply the Spirit alters our thinking! Now, Paul, a former Chief Pharisee, is ministering to women! A Christian submitted to the Spirit will overcome prejudices that he's been trained in.

The story picks up in Acts 16:14, ***"A woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple fabrics, a worshiper of God, was listening; and the Lord opened her heart to respond to the things spoken by Paul."*** We learn about Lydia, who is a ***"worshiper of God."*** This means that she's a Gentile convert to Judaism. Luke

uses the term ***“worshiper of God,”*** similarly to the way Paul spoke of Jews as, ***“you who fear God,”*** Acts 13:16. It doesn’t mean Jews, or Lydia, are saved, but that they’ve turned from pagan idols and have a sense of the God of Abraham; but not an intimate relationship with God. The kind of worship in view here is more of a religious profession, where the heart has not yet turned in faith. But, ***“the Lord opened her heart to respond to the things spoken by Paul.”*** By God’s grace, the Lord inclined her heart to desire and attend to the gospel being preached by Paul. She’s now responded in faith and is a Christian! Neither truth itself, nor the desire for the gospel, originate in the will of man, but come from God. Because of God’s stirring in her heart, she was able ***“to respond.”*** Another evangelical key is understanding that reaping a harvest is the result of God working supernaturally in people.

God changed Paul’s heart about Gentiles and about women. God opened Lydia’s heart to accept the truth. When it comes to evangelism, my job is to speak the truth in love, and it’s God who brings about a positive response.

So, a quick recap is, without compromising truth, do what you can to show people how much they matter. Don’t be so determined that the Holy Spirit can’t redirected your steps. And, recognize that your faith and the faith of others is a miraculous gift from the Lord!

Consider Lydia’s life before and after her conversion to Christianity. Before knowing Christ, as busy as she must have been running her own purple linen business, she wasn’t too busy to worship and pray. While others might be saying, *“I can just stay home and worship and pray,”* Lydia went to a weekly gathering. Lydia understood the importance of getting together with fellow worshipers. In her efforts to pray, God brought Paul to her so she could rightly know and understand who God really was. She humbly received the Word of God which Paul shared. Now, having a real relationship with the Living God, Lydia wisely allowed her faith to govern her life. She went home and told her household about Jesus, she and her household were baptized, and she then supported the ministry of Paul and the others.

Do you know Jesus? I mean, more than having an empty profession, or a familiarity about Jesus; do you really know Him? Is He living inside you? If not, it’s not too late to entrust yourself to Jesus for the forgiveness of your sins. He cares for you! He died for you, and He conquered death and sin for you! That’s why salvation is found in no other name but Jesus!

If you’re a Christian, consider this thought, *“What if others evangelized as often as I do?”*