

Sharing the Gospel in Truth

Sharing the Gospel is not easy, especially in today's world. Some have a fear of scaring potential Christians away from the Faith if they share improperly. At the same time the word *love* used in the Bible has been mixed up with society's own view of love which is a worldly love, not one of God, causing Christians to fail to love unbelievers properly. Rather than being open with unbelievers, it might appear to some that protecting them from hurt or discomfort is the "loving" response.

When I hear about evangelizing to non-Christians, I often imagine some person sitting at a street corner with tracts and passing them out aimlessly, or someone screaming, "Your all going to Hell for your sins! You unbelievers need Christ!" or even someone with a little pad of paper to count the number of times he's *shared the Gospel* one-on-one on a particular day, as though the Gospel had nothing to do with long term relationships between Christians, and only to do with knowing that Christ had to die for our sins.

The first is impersonal and doesn't necessarily show much dedication in the relationship between the evangelizer and recipient. I've been friendly enough to take several tracts just to see what's going on, but I've never felt any connection between the distributor and myself. I typically feel compassion for them and their willingness to stand out and suffer the indifference of most people (which maybe shows a particular strength), and I take one, but there's no sense that they care for me anymore than they would a random person sitting next to them in a restaurant. Except for the already curious, or seriously searching, passing these out seems to be little better than having a box of tracts attached to a large sign. You lose an element of the personal relationship that Christians are supposed to have in the world. Even Christ did more than just hand out pamphlets. And yet a reason behind pamphlets is that they are being handed to people who are on the run and are already so busy that they don't have *time* for any meaningful relationship building. How effectively can one share the Gospel with someone like this? Did Christ minister to people on the run or people who had time to stop and listen?

The second is condemning, starting with words meant to frighten people into conversion, and it lacks an openness to conversation that would be present if love was truly being presented to the hearers. Christ was certainly not without tough and challenging words, but He didn't use them in a way to frighten people into clinging to Him. He often made it clear that it was difficult to follow Him (Matt 7:13-14,21-23, Matt 19:21-26, Matt 10:37-38), and even told people things they'd perhaps not like to hear (John 8:43-47), but in all these cases he had a receptive audience listening to Him, not randomly wandering people who could care less about what He had to say. In John 8, He was in the temple with the Pharisees (v. 12-20) and He starts out in a conversation with those of them who were interested. In v. 30-31 He begins talking to those who start to believe in Him, and finally He says things that would seem frighteningly harsh, "You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires" (v. 44a). And, eventually they take up stones against Him in v. 59. I see Christ as always being open to a dialogue and is not afraid of making people feel uncomfortable, yet at the same time He begins in a way that builds curiosity for the words He will say, and a brief relationship between his audience, because He knows it helps no one if they aren't listening. Crying

out to people with whom you have no good report will not make them want to listen. And yet it also seems that Jesus purposely sought out a place where His message would have an audience without Him having to be afraid of everyone turning away when He proclaimed it from the start. What's also clear is that although Jesus did say they would die in sin if they didn't believe in Him (v.24,51), He was very clear that it wouldn't be easy for them to do because of their hearts, and all the while these were people willing to listen, not ambivalent bystanders. It's critical for Christ to focus on their hearts because, as 1st John 4:18-19 says, "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and he who fears is not perfected in love. We love, because He first loved us," the danger of death is not the focus of the Gospel, it's where their hearts are in respect to God. If He implied they could just *believe* and be saved to save their own skin, He would be deceiving them. But, Christ knows that if they really believe, it won't be of fear, but of love.

The third is problematic because the check marks are for the singular times of sharing the Gospel and not indications of a longer relationship meant to carry the person to a deeper understanding of Christ. It's the best of the three because it allows for a conversation (if that route is taken) and an immediate relationship is formed. Unfortunately, a counting of successes may interfere with properly conveying the message of the Gospel. Just as described in the second case, Christ didn't share the truth for the numbers and made it clear that following Him was not an easy task, whereas counting numbers may encourage softer messages that are more appealing and will increasingly result in more *successes*.

Jesus and His Apostles all mention the topic about people turning from Him due to the Gospel being proclaimed. Jesus said, "Do not think that I have come to bring peace on earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and a man's foes will be those of his own household" (Matt 10:34-36) which clearly shows that even among our friends there shouldn't be a lack of tension. If people feel completely comfortable, where is this dividing sword? What pierces the hearts of the unbelievers and demonstrates to them the value of Christ in our lives? Paul wrote, "But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumph, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere. For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance of death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things? For we are not, like so many, peddlers of God's word; but as men of sincerity, as commissioned by God, in the sight of God we speak in Christ" (2 Cor 2:14-17), expressing that even he doesn't expect, through telling the truth, people will only be drawn to Christ and not reject Christ. And Paul taught this truth with love by earnestly caring for those he reached out to, as he says in 2 Thes 2:4,7-9, "... but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not to please men, but to please God who tests our hearts. ... But we were gentle among you, like a nurse taking care of her children. So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us. For you remember our labor and toil, brethren; we worked night and day, that we might not burden any of you, while we preached to you the gospel of God." Concerning false teachers, 1st John 4:5-6 says, "They are of the world, therefore

what they say is of the world, and the world listens to them. We are of God. Whoever knows God listens to us, and he who is not of God does not listen to us. By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error,” which is almost a warning to any of us who believe that we can properly share the Gospel and not expect people to turn away and be unreceptive.

On how to share the Gospel, Paul is clear in 2 Cor 4:1-4 by saying, “Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart. We have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways; we refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God’s word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to every man’s conscience in the sight of God. And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled only to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the likeness of God.” We should not be *underhanded*, but clear. In our clarity, people may think we’re being deceitful or unclear, but this is not the case, but is due to their closed minds. By saying “it is veiled only to those who are perishing,” Paul lessens the worry brought about due to any rejection of our honest attempts to reach out, because it’s not ours to expect so much as it is ours to do in a loving and correct way.

Again Paul says in 2 Tim 4, “I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus who is judge of the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word, be urgent in season and out of season, convince, rebuke, and exhort, be unfailing in patience and in teaching. For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own likings, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander into myths.” A good warning towards those who may desire to take the easier path and seek to please people with what they want to hear, and not the truth.

An example of Paul’s directness, there’s Acts 26:24-29 where Paul is before King Agrippa in a court, “And as he thus made his defense, Festus said with a loud voice, ‘Paul, you are mad; your great learning is turning you mad.’ But Paul said, ‘I am not mad, most excellent Festus, but I am speaking the sober truth. For the king knows about these things, and to him I speak freely; for I am persuaded that none of these things has escaped his notice, for this was not done in a corner. King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you believe.’ And Agrippa said to Paul, ‘In a short time you think to make me a Christian!’ And Paul said, ‘Whether short or long, I would to God that not only you but also all who hear me this day might become such as I am—except for these chains.’”

In conclusion, sharing the Gospel is best done to those who are willing to listen. Watering down or avoiding difficult teachings of the Gospel is not good because that is like dodging reality. Better is a spirit of patience and perseverance toward those with whom we lovingly share the Gospel. And if someone rejects the message, then this should not cause us to weaken our message unless we do not speak in truth and love, but instead we should be able to accept that not everyone will be open to it. So, teaching out of love does not mean we have failed if someone does not come to Christ, but we have only failed if we are incapable of being honest and straightforward due to a fear of rejection or a lack of love for that person. And our focus should not be to ultimately make people come to God in dread of Him, but in a love of Him that makes them freely dedicate their lives to Him.