



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Evangelical • Reformed • Catholic

Marks of a Healthy Church Mark Five: A Biblical Understanding of Evangelism (Part One)

Fr. William Klock

March 21, 2010 — Passion Sunday

I want to start this morning by telling you about a man named John Harper. He was born in Glasgow in 1872. When he was about fourteen he became a Christian and from that time on, when he wasn't working at his job in a factory, he devoted his time to preaching up and down the streets of his city and pouring out his soul in passionate pleading for men to be reconciled to God.

A few years later he was taken in by E.A. Carter, pastor of the Pioneer Baptist Mission in London. This allowed Harper to devote all his time and energy to the work that was so important to him—to evangelism. In 1896 he started his own church, which started with a small group of 25, but when he left 13 years later had grown to 500. Harper attributed much of his zeal for evangelism to his own near brushes with death. When he was two, he had fallen into a well. When he was 26 he was caught in a rip tide and swept out to sea and barely survived. When he was 32 he had a brush with death on a sinking ship in the Mediterranean. But all these near disasters confirmed the urgency of his message and the need for others to hear it.

He became a popular speaker at evangelistic meetings. The Moody Church in Chicago invited him to America to speak and it went so well that they invited him back a few years later. And so it was that Harper boarded a ship one day with a second-class ticket at Southampton, ready to voyage to America. His wife had died not long before, but his six-year-old daughter travelled with him. What happened on that voyage we know from two sources. His daughter, Nana, died in 1986 and relates how her father woke her up one night, about midnight, and explained that the ship had struck an iceberg. He said there was another ship on the way, but in the meantime—just to be safe—she needed to get into one of the lifeboats. He said he'd wait for the other ship to arrive.

Of course we all know the rest of that tragic story. Young Nana was saved from the sinking *Titanic*. We know the rest of the story because a few months later at a prayer meeting in Hamilton, a young Scotsman stood up and in tears told the amazing story of his own conversion. He had been on *Titanic* too. The

sinking ship had left him hanging onto a piece of floating debris in the icy water. "Suddenly," he said, "a wave brought a man near, John Harper. He, too, was holding a piece of wreckage. He called out, 'Man are you saved?' 'No, I am not,' I replied. He shouted back, 'Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved.' The waves bore [Harper] away, but a little later, he was washed back beside me again. 'Are you saved now?' he called out. 'No,' I answered. 'Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved.' Then losing hold on the wood, [Harper] sank. And there, alone in the night with two miles of water under me, I trusted Christ as my saviour. I am John Harper's last convert."

That's an amazing story. I can't help but contrast John Harper with myself—and I think if we're honest that goes for all of us here. If I found myself floating in the icy North Atlantic, having just survived the sinking of *Titanic*, and knowing that if help didn't come soon I'd freeze to death...well, honestly, the last thing I'd be thinking about is whether or not the people around me were saved. I'm a reluctant evangelist—and sometimes no evangelist at all. I'm usually a pretty forward person, but when it comes to evangelism, I can suddenly become very respectful of other people's space. I know I ought to share the Good News, but at that moment that person becomes a witness-stopping, excuse-inspiring spiritual challenge. And I know I'm not alone. There are people who are gifted with the charism of "evangelism" and John Harper was probably one of them. Not only do they see everyone around them as a sinner doomed to hell, but they've been given the boldness to proclaim the Gospel. And yet even if it's not our particular spiritual gift, as Christians we're *all* called to evangelise.

We know we're called to share the Gospel, but we don't. And then we struggle with guilt. Often times we excuse ourselves because we're pretty sure we just don't know how to do it. Or we cop out, saying, "I'll leave it for the professionals—I'll just find some way to get my friend to church and let the preacher do it." Or, "I'll just quietly give them this tract or this book and hope he'll read it." We might even excuse ourselves saying something like, "Well, it's just not kosher to push my faith on someone else. We live in a pluralistic age. Religion is personal and I'm just going to keep it to myself."

I know that we all identify with these sorts of attitudes on some level, so for the next two Sundays I want to look at the fifth mark of a healthy church, and that's *a Biblical understanding of Evangelism*. If you remember back to the two weeks before I was on holiday, I said we'd be looking at the Gospel and how we understand it. We looked at the Gospel itself, then last time we looked at the Gospel from the standpoint of having a biblical understanding of conversion. Now I want to look at it from the standpoint of how

we share it. I want to consider four questions: First, "Who should evangelise?" Second, "How should we evangelise?" Third, "What is evangelism?" And then, finally, "Why should we evangelise?" This morning we'll look at the first two.

So, first, who should evangelise? We might be uncomfortable with the idea of evangelism, but as you read the Bible, you can't avoid it. Evangelism is everywhere in the New Testament and even in the Old, the Jews might not have been entrusted with the same task we have been, but over and over they were told to be a light to the Gentiles. In Romans 1 St. Paul writes about what was not only his *duty* to spread the Gospel, but also that he was *eager* to preach it. Was that just his calling? Or does it apply to all of us? At the end of his earthly ministry, Jesus gathered his disciples and said to them:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.

We call that the "Great Commission" and the consensus is that Jesus gave it to *all* his disciples.

And the disciples took this commission to heart. Read through their epistles or read through the book of Acts, and over and over we see them doing the work of evangelism. They evangelised constantly. Some people ask, "Who is supposed to evangelise?" Is it just the clergy—just preachers or just people with the specific spiritual gift of evangelism? Is the only time we evangelise on Sunday mornings when the "professional" gets up to read the Bible and preach? Is the Great Commission only for professional religious types? Or does it have something to do with *all* of us?

Scripture is pretty clear that Jesus' commission is for all believers. It wasn't just the apostles sharing the Gospel. Look at Acts 8:1-4:

And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him. But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison. Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word.

Notice it was "those who were scattered" that we're told went about preaching the word—evangelizing. And note that Luke tells us that it was all those *except* the apostles who were scattered. Who was evangelizing? Everyone!

Not just the professionals, not just the teachers and preachers—everyone was. The rest of Acts 8 tells the story of Philip’s evangelistic efforts—not an elder, not a bishop, not an apostle, “just” a deacon—one of the men appointed to wait tables and help with the poor.

Acts 11:19-21 continues this story of “lay-evangelism” by those who had been scattered:

Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except Jews. But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Hellenists also, preaching the Lord Jesus. And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord.

Again, we see “ordinary” Christians going out to spread the Good News.

We should remember St. Peter’s admonition: “Always be prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you” (1 Peter 3:15). Peter wrote that to *all* of us, not just to the professional clergy. All of us are called to spread the Good News. And remember too that, part of our evangelistic activity has to do with the way we relate to each other as believers. Jesus said, “By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35). If you aren’t expressing true Christian love to every member of the church, you’re in disobedience to God and you hinder the evangelistic work of your brothers and sisters.

But if we’re honest, often the main reason we want to shift responsibility for evangelism to others is that we’re not really sure how to do it. And that’s our second question this morning: *How should we evangelise?* Obviously the most basic answer is that we need to share God’s Word. I said in the first sermon in this series: God’s Word creates God’s people. We need to spread the Word, but practically speaking, how do we do that?

Back in the ‘70s Joseph Bayly wrote a book of modern Christian parables called *The Gospel Blimp*. The title parable was about a group of Christian friends, who realising that they need to evangelise their card-playing and beer-drinking neighbours purchase a blimp to fly around town, towing banners with Bible verses on them. Of course, the blimp doesn’t accomplish much so they modify it to drop bundles of evangelistic tracts periodically. When it still doesn’t have the impact they want, they install a loud speaker so that the blimp can sail over the city blaring Scripture. The end result is that the blimp was sabotaged by the townspeople. It was a total failure. And yet those friends *were* spreading the Word. Why didn’t it work? Probably most

importantly, their evangelism lacked personal relationship. But it’s also true that we need to present the Word rightly. This morning I want to give you six biblical guidelines for how we should evangelise.

First, *tell people with honesty that if they repent and believe they will be saved—but that it will also be costly.* We need to accurately present the *whole* message. Sometimes were afraid to present the parts of the Gospel that we think might be too awkward or too hard to explain. We’re afraid to include anything negative in our presentation of the Good News, and so talking about sin and guilt and repentance and sacrifice disappear from our message. About ten years ago Robert Schuller had this to say: “I don’t think that anything has been done in the name of Christ and under the banner of Christianity that has proven more destructive to human personality, and hence counter-productive to the evangelistic enterprise, than the unchristian, uncouth strategy of attempting to make people aware of their lost and sinful condition.”

It leaves you wondering what Gospel he preaches, because Scripture is clear that it is only as we realise that we are lost and sinful that anyone will understand his or her need for the Good News of Jesus Christ. He came to save lost sinners! If you read the summaries of St. Peter’s sermons in the beginning of Acts, one thing that comes through loud and clear is his message that we need Christ precisely because we are sinners.

We can’t pretend that everyone is out there honestly looking for truth. The Bible teaches us that men and women are by nature estranged from God and at enmity with him. We have to be honest about that. It might not be “polite” to say, but it’s true and if we’re going to be faithful, we have to say it. Holding back important but difficult parts of the truth is manipulative and when we do it, we’re selling a false bill of goods.

Second, *tell people with urgency that if they repent and believe they will be saved—but they must decide now.* We need to make clear the urgency of our message and that those with whom we’re sharing it can’t waste time waiting for a “better deal.”

Everyone’s always looking for the better deal. I just got back from California. It took me a month or more to book my flight, because I was checking the internet every day to find the best deal. I have a brother-in-law who has been saying he’s going to buy a new computer for the last two or three years. He’s researched *everything* so that he can make an educated purchase, but every time he makes up his mind what to get, they announce the next generation of big, better, more powerful computers is just around the corner...and then he starts all over

again. Years later he still hasn’t bought one, because he’s waiting for a better deal.

But brother and sisters, we should know that when it comes to the Gospel, there’s no better deal. The Bible tells us over and over that Jesus is the only way to God. How else would you suggest that sinners and our holy God be reconciled? There is no other way than Christ, and if Christ is the only way, then what are we waiting for? As Scripture warns, “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts” (Hebrews 4:7).

Jesus was urgent in his teaching. Consider this parable that St. Luke records for us:

A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. And he said to the vinedresser, ‘Look, for three years now I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and I find none. Cut it down. Why should it use up the ground?’ And he answered him, ‘Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put on manure. Then if it should bear fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.’ (Luke 13:6-9)

It’s not manipulative or insensitive to bring up urgent warnings like this—it’s the truth. None of us has an unlimited amount of time to decide whether or not we’re going to follow Jesus. The time we have is limited, which is why St. Paul tells us to make the most of every opportunity (Ephesians 5:16). We’re prone to being content with the idea of being selfish today and then turning to Christ just before the end. No. We should know, as St. Paul knew, that, “The appointed time has grown *very short*...those who deal with the world [should deal with it] as though they had no dealings with it. *For the present form of this world is passing away*” (1 Corinthians 7:29, 31).

What situations are you in right now that you won’t always be in? How are you using those situations in obedience to God? Trust him to use you in those situations instead of always looking for new situations. Trust the Lord to use you here and now, instead of waiting for some other time and situation. Remember, you have no idea when or if that next situation may even come! “The days are evil,” says Paul in Ephesians 5:16, meaning that they’re dangerous, they’re a fleeting opportunity, and so we need to redeem the time, we need to cash it in now, making the most of every opportunity. So we say with Paul that, in view of certain judgement, Christ’s love compels us to proclaim the Good News (2 Corinthians 5:10-14).

Third, *Tell people with joy that if they repent and believe the Good News they will be saved—that however difficult it may be, it’s all worth it!* Think of Hebrews 11 where we read the accounts of those who suffered hard things

for the faith and yet endured. In Hebrews 12 we read that Jesus himself endured the cross for the joy that was set before him.

Some of you may have heard the famous statement of Jim Elliot, the young man who was murdered by the very South American Indians he went to evangelise. He wrote in his journal: "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose." Think about that. What do we gain in coming to Christ? We gain a relationship with God himself. We gain forgiveness, meaning, purpose, freedom, community, certainty, and hope. Being honest about the difficulties when we're sharing the Gospel doesn't mean we have to mask the blessings. Nor does it mean we have to pretend that the Christian life is difficult simply so that people will think we're being honest. No, we need to be fully honest; that means telling people that we have great news in Jesus Christ. For all the difficult things there are, it's infinitely more than worth it to make the decision to die to self and to follow Jesus.

Fourth, *use the Bible*. Learn the Bible for yourself and share it with others. There's a host of Scripture memory programmes out there and most of them include scriptures to use when sharing your faith. But however you learn or memorise Scripture, what you're doing in using the Bible for evangelism is showing people that you're not just sharing your own thoughts and ideas. In Acts 8 we see Philip going to share the Gospel with the Ethiopian eunuch. He started, Luke tells us, with the Old Testament and used it to tell him about Jesus. Again, when we use the Bible in sharing the Gospel, we help people to realise that we're not just talking about our own ideas, but about the very words of God.

Fifth, *realise that the lives of individual Christians and of the church as a whole are a central part of evangelism*. Our lives, as individuals and as a congregation, should give credibility to the Gospel that we proclaim. This was driven home to me this past week when a non-Christian friend pointed out that we Christians are often our own worst enemies, because we rarely seem to live out the message that we preach. This is one of the reasons why church membership is so important. We as a church bear a corporate responsibility to present to the world what it means to be a Christian. We should understand clearly what church membership means and should help our brothers and sisters to understand it too. God is glorified not only by our speaking the message, but by our actually living it out consistently. That doesn't mean we have to be perfect. That's impossible, but we can at least try to live in a way that commends the Gospel. Remember Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount: "Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven"

(Matthew 5:16). That's talking about your life. Your life can be lived in such a way that it brings glory to God as others who see it begin to believe to the Gospel.

And remember, this involves more than just your individual life; it involves how believers live *together* too. Again, remember the words of Jesus: "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).

Live a life of committed love to the other members of the church, as a fundamental part of your own sanctification and of your evangelistic ministry. This is why Jesus stressed that our loving each other is even more important than our worship of him. "If you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift" (Matthew 5:23-24). If you've got unfinished business with a brother or sister, if you're in any way not at peace and living in love with them, you've got no business coming to the Lord's Table or even bring your offerings to God without first taking care of that business, without first being reconciled. If we are not at peace with each other, we make a mockery of Jesus and the Gospel and shame ourselves before the world. Our individual lives alone are not a sufficient witness. Our lives together as a church are the confirming echo of our witness. We need to make sure our corporate witness is pure.

And finally, sixth, *remember to pray*. Remember in all of this that God is sovereign in the work of salvation. We are called to proclaim the message, but it's the Holy Spirit who turns the heart and converts the sinner. Pray for opportunities to share your faith. Pray that your witness, both your words and your life, will be faithful. Pray that God will open your eyes to the opportunities he gives to share your faith. And pray that he will be at work in the hearts of those who hear our message.

That's as far as I want to go this morning. We'll look at the questions of "What is evangelism?" and "Why should we evangelise?" next week. In the meantime remember: When we ask who should evangelise? The answer is that we all should. When we ask "How should we evangelise?" Remember present the Gospel in full: that it is costly, that it is urgent men and women receive it, and that it is immensely worth the cost. Use the Bible. Make sure that your life and the life we all live together back up the message we proclaim. And remember to undergird all of our evangelism with prayer.

Please pray with me: Heavenly Father, on this Passion Sunday we remember that you sent your Son to die for us, that he might redeem us from sin and death and restore us to fellowship with you. Father, remind us each day of the significance of your costly gift of new life that we might with great joy take it to all those around us. Give us opportunities to share our faith with others, give us boldness to overcome our fears, give us the sense to prepare and equip ourselves for the task, and most of all we ask that your Holy Spirit would be at work preparing the way before us that our work might bear fruit for the Kingdom. We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

(Note: This sermon series has been adapted from Mark Dever's book, "Nine Marks of a Healthy Church, Crossway, 2004.)