



Marks of a Healthy Church

Mark Five: A Biblical Understanding of Evangelism (Part Two)

Fr. William Klock

April 11, 2010 — Easter 1

This morning I want to continue where we left off on Passion Sunday in our look at a biblical understanding of Evangelism. You'll remember that I said we'd look at four questions. The first was "Who should evangelise?" Do you remember who should evangelise? Yes! Everyone! And the second question was "How should we evangelise?" We need to share the whole message of the Gospel. We can't leave out the hard or challenging parts. We need to communicate the urgency of the message. We need to use the Bible as we share with people. We need to realise that our lives, both individually as Christians and corporately as the body of Christ are central to our evangelism. And finally, remembering that God is sovereign in turning hearts to himself, we need to pray.

The third question I said we'd look at is "What is evangelism?" and in a sense this directly ties into the question of how we should evangelise, because what we understand evangelism to be will always influence how we do it—which is why it's so important we understand this. There are lots of instances when we share the Gospel wrongly because we misunderstand what evangelism is. Let me answer the question first by saying what evangelism is *not*.

First, one of the most common objections to evangelism today is that it's an imposition of our beliefs on someone else. Frankly, the way evangelism is often done leads to this kind of understanding, but when you understand what the Bible presents as evangelism, you understand that it's really not a matter of imposing our beliefs.

First, understand that the things you believe as a Christian are *facts*. They aren't just beliefs or opinions—they are facts. Second, these facts are not *yours* in

the sense that they pertain only to you or your perspective or experience. And they're not facts you made up. This is why I stressed last week that you use the Bible when you evangelise. These aren't your ideas; they are God's. And so remember that when you evangelise, you are presenting the facts of the Christian Gospel.

And of course, in biblical evangelism we don't *impose* anything. In fact we really can't. The Bible tells us that evangelism is simply telling the Good News; it does not include making sure that the other person responds to it correctly. It would be great if we could make people respond, but we can't. According to the Bible, the fruit of evangelism comes from God, not from our clever techniques or our personal passion. Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 3:5-7:

What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth.

This is something we really need to understand. Neither you nor I can ever *make* someone a Christian. To become a Christian requires a change of heart that only the Holy Spirit can make. We are simply charged with the task of proclaiming the message and demonstrating the love of Christ. We are to present the message freely to all; we cannot manipulate anyone to truly accept it. Truly biblical evangelism is never an imposition.

Second, we have to be careful not to mistake personal testimony for evangelism. Without a doubt, sharing what God has done in our own lives can be a very effective *part* of sharing the Good News with someone, but we can't simply stop with what God has done for us. There have been a lot of times when I've shared with someone how much Jesus means to me, but in hindsight I've realised that I never included the Gospel message itself in what I shared—and that seems to be the common problem with testimony sharing. I've had people try to evangelise me by telling me their story, but they never actually shared the Gospel. Stories and testimonies have become very popular in our Postmodern, "that's-good-for-you" world. Not many people object to hearing

ours story, but they often do object when we include the Gospel message. We need to be careful not to assume that simply because we've shared our testimony, that we have also shared the cross at the heart of the Good News.

Third, we often mistake social action and political involvement for evangelism. When our eyes fall from God to humanity, it's not surprising that social problems replace sin as our concern. We see horizontal problems—problems between people—and they distract us from the fundamental vertical problem between us and God. We get involved in crusades for public virtue and mistake it for evangelism. It's not that crusades for public virtues are all wrong—a lot of the time they are often good and necessary—but remember that stopping a same-sex couple from getting married or stopping a girl from getting an abortion isn't going to save them from eternal damnation if they don't know Christ. In a lot our social crusades we end up putting the cart before the horse. We're upset because people aren't living like Christians, but we forget that people can't live like Christians until the Holy Spirit has first renewed their hearts. When we do engage in political action we need to be sure we do it in such a way that we still express our concern for the souls of those are involved in sinful activities.

Brothers and sisters, evangelism is not declaring God's political plan for the nations. It's not recruiting for the church. It's not combating social ills. Evangelism is the proclamation of the Gospel to individual men and women. Societies are challenged and changed when, through his Gospel, the Lord brings individual men and women together in his Church to display his character in the interactions and relationships of those whom he has redeemed.

Fourth, we sometimes mistake apologetics for evangelism. Apologetics is the activity of answering questions and objections and defending the faith. Now, it's not to say that as we evangelise we don't sometimes need to answer questions and defend the faith, but apologetics is not the same thing as evangelism. Defending the virgin birth or the resurrection is very important, but it's not evangelism. You can believe in the virgin birth or the resurrection, but there's more to the Gospel message than these individual doctrines. Apologetics is driven by

someone else's agenda. Evangelism is following Christ's agenda and telling the Good News about him. Evangelism is the positive act of telling the Good News about Jesus Christ and the way of salvation through him. One of the best modern examples I can think of is Josh McDowell. He's written a number of very popular volumes that defend the faith against secularism and cults, and while I often think he's wrong on a lot of issues, I can't think of a better example of someone who defends the faith *for the purpose of sharing the Good News with others*. He is first and foremost an evangelist. His apologetics work simply backs up his work as an evangelist.

Finally, fifth, one of our most common and dangerous mistakes is to confuse the *results* of evangelism with evangelism itself. Friends, evangelism must never be confused with the fruit of evangelism. We get into especially dangerous territory if we combine this misunderstanding with false understandings of the Gospel and conversion, because we end up thinking that not only is evangelism the same as seeing others converted, but thinking that it's within our own power to convert others. This kind of thinking leads to manipulation more than it does real evangelism.

The Bible tells us that evangelism can never be defined in terms of results or methods, but only in terms of faithfulness to the message preached. Consider how Acts tells us that there were times when St. Paul preached the Gospel and received a terrible response. John Stott spoke at the Lausanne conference on evangelism twenty-five years ago and said that "To evangelise...does not mean to win converts...but simply to announce the good news, irrespective of the results." Sharing the Gospel is our role. Converting hearts is the Spirit's. Consider 2 Corinthians 2:15-16:

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 from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life.

Now Paul isn't saying he preached two messages or that he could look at a crowd and say, "Okay, I can see who the elect are. I'm going to preach one message to you, and then let me preach another

message to all those who aren't becoming Christians." No, Paul preached the same Gospel everywhere and to everyone, and yet, he was to some an aroma of life and to others the smell of death. His one ministry had two different effects.

Think of Jesus' parable of the sower. The sower went out and scattered seed that landed on different kinds of soil. He didn't change his method because some soil was good or some was bad or because he was sowing seeds on the road. The point of the parable is that some people will respond to the Gospel and some won't, even though they all hear the same message. We can't judge the correctness of what we do in evangelism by the immediate response that we see. Brothers and sisters, we have to understand this, because failure to get this can distract well-meaning churches into pragmatic, results-oriented work and it can transform pastors into neurotic people-pleasers and people-manipulators. We make a terrible mistake when we misunderstand evangelism so badly that we think we can tell from the immediate results whether we are evangelising properly. As Christians we should know that, even if we're faithful in sharing the Gospel, people still may not respond. Their lack of acceptance of the Gospel does not necessarily mean our technique was wrong.

Misunderstanding at this point often cripples individual Christians with a deep sense of personal failure and, ironically, often makes us scared and hesitant about evangelising. I've known Christians who felt horribly guilty because the person they'd been evangelising for thirty years still wasn't a Christian. They thought it was their fault. But remember that Scripture teaches us that conversions don't come just because we're good at sharing the Gospel and that rejection of the message isn't necessarily because we're bad at sharing it. Evangelism is not fundamentally a matter of our methods, but of our *faithfulness* in proclaiming the cross.

Some of you are Christians today despite a terrible presentation of the Gospel. The person might have been scared, stuttering, forgetful, confused, or even obnoxious or pushy. But somehow the truth was there amid the errors, and the Holy Spirit used it to bring you to repentance and faith.

Now that's not to excuse being scared, confused, pushy, or obnoxious as we evangelise. We should to work to be prepared and to do it right. That's our responsibility, but we can be thankful that God is a big God. He can even use our mistakes as he overlooks and works around our faults for his glory.

So, what is evangelism? It's the proclamation of the Good News of salvation in Christ and a calling to repentance. It's not persuading people to make a decision. Again, our part is proclamation. The Holy Spirit does the work of regeneration and conversion. Remember that we don't fail in our evangelism if we faithfully present the Gospel to all. If we can remember that evangelism is the sharing of the wonderful truth of the cross, then the obedience to the call of evangelism becomes a joyful privilege.

And that brings us to the final question I want to ask: Why should we evangelise? It might seem like a funny question to ask, but it's important. What is our motivation for evangelism? Some people might not think this is an important issue but it is, because there are all sorts of wrong motivations for evangelism.

Some of us evangelise for selfish reasons. One of the greatest dangers as a church is that we do evangelism simply because we need more people filling the pews in order to pay the bills. As individuals we can evangelise simply because we want to be right or because we want to win an argument with someone. I knew a couple of guys in university who always talked about their gifts as evangelists, but we also noticed they only ever engaged in evangelism when the cute girls were around. They wanted to look spiritual. Some people just want to have a reputation as successful evangelists. Not long ago I read an interview with one big-name pastor. He was asked how his church was able to have 200 or more baptisms every year. He said he has two interns on staff and it's their job to each bring at least two new converts forward for baptism each week at the altar call. He was asked, "Well, what if there aren't any new converts that week?" The pastor said, "Then I'll hire a different intern who *will* make two converts every week. They don't invite you to speak at conferences

unless you've got at least 200 baptisms a year." This was a common attitude amongst the Revivalists. I was reading about a guy named Smith Wigglesworth who pledged that he would make at least one convert every day. He wrote about one night realising that he hadn't done his "duty" so he ran out to the street at 11:30, grabbed the first guy he saw, and convinced him to become a Christian. I wish that we all had that kind of zeal for evangelism, but friends, that's not evangelism. The Revivalists were the pioneers of manipulation because they were convinced that conversion was the responsibility of the evangelist. Sadly, the end result has been innumerable people headed who are still headed to hell, but happily traipsing there with a dangerous false assurance that they're heaven-bound. This idea that we—that you and I—can change hearts, persuade minds, and bring people to Christ has become a *very* common attitude in the Church today and it takes everything I've been saying and turns it upside-down as it removes the Holy Spirit from his role as the one who brings our evangelism to fruit.

So what are the right reasons to proclaim the Good News? First, it was what Jesus commissioned us to do before he ascended to heaven. As Christians we ought to desire to be obedient. As I said last week, obedience is one of the signs of true faith. Second, we should be motivated by a love for the lost. As Christians the Spirit works to turn our hearts away from love of self to a love for others and when we see that the people around us will be eternally damned without hearing this message, love should motivate us to tell them. And most importantly, our love for God should motivate us.

Love for God is the most important motive. John Cheesman in his book on evangelism writes this:

"Love for God is the only sufficient motive for evangelism. Self-love will give way to self-centredness; love for the lost will fail with those whom we cannot love, and when difficulties seem insurmountable. Only a deep love for God will keep us following his way, declaring his Gospel, when human resources fail. Only our love for God—and, more important, his love for us—will keep us from the dangers which beset us. When the desire for popularity with men, or for

success in human terms, tempts us to water down the Gospel, to make it palatable, then only if we love God will we stand fast by his truth and his ways."

Ultimately our love for God leads to a desire to see him glorified. Throughout the Bible, God makes himself known to his creation. We share his Gospel to glorify God as the truth about him is made known to his creation. The call to evangelism is a call to turn our lives outward—from focusing on ourselves and our needs to focusing on God and the world that he has made. And that includes loving people who are made in God's image and yet are at enmity with him, alienated from him, and in need of salvation from sin and guilt. We give God glory when we come on Sunday morning and sing praises to him and declare our love and devotion to him in our songs and in our prayers. But, brothers and sisters, we rob him of that glory when our songs and prayers and declarations of love are nothing more than words we sing or pray on Sunday morning. We give him the greatest glory when we demonstrate our love and devotion to him in our obedience to him and in our love for others as we tell the people around us about the great things God has done in Christ. Evangelism isn't the only way to give God glory, but it is one of the most important and if we don't do it, we make all the things we sing and pray on Sunday morning lies. Friends, when the message of the cross has captured our hearts and our minds, our tongues, as stammering, halting, awkward, sarcastic, and imperfect as they may be, won't be far behind. Remember, Jesus said, "Out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks" (Matthew 12:34 NIV). What is your heart full of and what do you spend your words on? The more we let Jesus capture our hearts, the more he's also going to capture our tongues and use them to his glory.

Please pray with me: "Heavenly Father, we thank you for the grace you have offered us through your Son when he died for us on the cross. We thank you that at some point in time, whether it was a parent, a friend, a priest—whomever—that you shared with each of us the Good News of the cross of Christ and that your Holy Spirit was at work in our hearts, turning them to you. Father, for many of us, our first love has grown cold. Life and the world around us distract us from the

supremacy of your love and grace and mercy. Kindle the fire again in our hearts and as our hearts are once again full of love for you, let our mouths overflow with the Good News, that we might be part of the work as you grow your kingdom. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Lord. Amen.

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