



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Evangelical • Reformed • Catholic

Witnessing the Light

St. John 1:6-9

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What is evangelism...other than a word that's often scary for a lot of Christians? It conjures up images of Bible-thumping preachers yelling at people from street corners or cold-calling your neighbours—knocking on their doors, making small talk and then suddenly hitting them upside the head with the Gospel and then having them forever avoid you until either you or they move away. For a lot of Christians, just hearing that word—e-vangelism—makes us feel guilty and inadequate because we've either never done it, or we *think* we've never done it, or we've done a terrible job of it, or we feel just plain inadequate to do it in the first place.

Some of our anxiety or our guilt comes from not really understanding what evangelism is or what it involves. So we need to ask: What is evangelism? Let me put it in secular terms first. Most of you know that I'm a long time Macintosh user and that I used to work repairing Apple computers. I really like Macs—and I like to talk about Macs. One time I was with Veronica at London Drugs. I was killing time by looking at the computers. I was looking at the new MacBook Air. There was a guy standing next to me and we started talking about it. He'd never used a Mac and was pretty sceptical. I started telling him how cool it was and before I realised what I'd done, I'd talked him into buying one—into being what Apple calls a “switcher”—someone who switches from Windows-based PCs to Macintosh. But did you know that Apple also has an official name for people like me? I'm an *evangelist*. An “Apple Evangelist” is someone who talks up Apple to PC users and *converts* them to Macintosh. In fact, back when I first started working on Macs, the marketing department at Apple was, believe it or not, actually called “Apple Evangelism”. They borrowed heavily on the Christian idea of evangelism. The world is dominated by the cold, unloving darkness of PCs and Windows and MicroSoft. Apple

Evangelism exists to share the “good news” of the warm and user-friendly Macintosh with those living in darkness. And brothers and sisters, it works. When I was working for Apple resellers we had PC users coming in every day and wanting to buy a Macintosh because their friends who used Macs had been telling them for years how great Macintosh was. That's evangelism—a secular and commercialised take on it—but still a form of evangelism in a broad sense.

We “evangelise” in that sense for all sorts of things. Every time we tell our friends about some product or some place or some company or some book we really like or when we talk about some political party or candidate or some cause we think is worthy, we're engaging in a form of evangelism. And consider that it's not very often that we hesitate to do it. If we're into something, if we like something, talking about it just becomes a *natural* part of our conversations. Being an Apple evangelist doesn't mean knocking on my neighbours' doors to insist they buy an iMac; it doesn't mean standing on the street corner shouting and waving my MacBook; and it doesn't mean having the organist play “Softly and tenderly Steve Jobs is calling” forty-three times until someone finally puts up his hand and commits to buying an iPod. It's a lot simpler and more natural than any of that.

I was thinking about all this one day and it occurred to me: When the subject of computers comes up, I've never been anxious or afraid to tell someone how great Macintosh computers are. I've never been afraid to tell someone about a great book I just finished reading. And there are a million and one uses for Mr. Clean Magic Erasers and when I hear someone talking about some problem they have with dirt that they haven't been able to solve and I know that a Magic Eraser will fix it, I don't sit there waffling about whether or not I might offend them by telling them. And yet, I wondered, why it is that when it comes to the solution to the world's greatest problem, we're so afraid—and by that I means “I'm so afraid”—to even bring up the subject of Jesus in a casual conversation where it would be completely natural to do so. Granted, Mr. Clean isn't going to change your worldview and you don't have to make him your Lord to use his products, but still, why is it that when someone asks why we're so happy or why we're so at

peace, and why, when it should be so natural to simply tell them about Jesus, we so often don't?

All of that is why I want to start today on a new series of sermons that I hope will encourage us all in the area of evangelism. The fact is that you and I *do* live in a world lost in darkness—darkness far deeper than any computer or software company can ever make. And, brothers and sisters, we also know—or we *should* know that we've got the answer—the solution—to that problem, and it's a far better answer than even the most user-friendly computer ever could be. In his first epistle, St. John tells us: “We know that we are from God, and the whole world lies in the power of the evil one” (1 John 5:19). Through Jesus Christ, God has forgiven our sins, he's restored us to himself, and now he's sent us back into the world as his people to bear his good news to those who haven't encountered it or who haven't heard it yet. Just as you're a living, breathing, walking testimony of so many secular things in life, you are also a living, breathing, walking testimony of the truth that “God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). When Jesus prayed for us, he said, “As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world” (John 17:18). And so I want to spend the next couple of months looking specifically at St. John's Gospel and what it can teach us about evangelism and about witnessing the good news of Jesus Christ.

John's Gospel is full of witnesses: In 8:14 Jesus describes “the *Father* who sent me bears witness about me.” In the same passage he says of *himself*, “I am the one who bears witness about myself.” In John 15:26 Jesus tells his disciples about the Holy Spirit bearing witness when he says, “when the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear *witness* about me.” Christians aren't the only evangelists. All three persons of the Holy Trinity are involved in bearing witness to the good news of the Gospel.

And God's Word—the Scriptures—are a witness too. The entire Old Testament was given in order to prepare the world for the coming of Jesus. In John 5:39 Jesus says, “You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness

about me.” And John’s Gospel itself is full of witnesses: John the Baptist came as another Elijah to prepare the way for Jesus—to declare that the light had come and that God’s kingdom was at hand.

John describes his own work as bearing witness to what he had seen while ministering with Jesus. And throughout the Gospel we read about all the people who had personal encounters with Jesus and went away telling their friends and family about him—being evangelists. Think of the Samaritan woman that Jesus met near a well. He revealed himself to her and she ran through town, urging the people: “Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?” (John 4:29). Or think of the blind man whom Jesus made to see again. The Pharisees tried to silence his witness, but he declared to them: “One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see” (John 9:25). Everyone who met Jesus went away talking about him and that ought to be a cue for us—we’ve not only met him, we’ve experienced him in our lives; we should be talking about him.

For the next few weeks I want to look specifically at John the Baptist. Let’s start with the first chapter of John—which is named after John the *Evangelist*, not John the *Baptist*—beginning at verse 6:

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light. The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. (John 1:6-9)

Verse seven tells us very specifically what John’s mission was: “to bear witness about the light.” And we know that that’s exactly what he did. Later on many of those who had heard John’s preaching about Jesus came to see Jesus himself and they said, “John did no sign, but everything that John said about this man was true” (John 10:41). He was faithful in bearing witness to the light. I find that particular passage very encouraging. In a day when many parts of the wider Church are obsessed with “signs and wonders” and “power evangelism” as essential parts of “authentic” witness, we see John the Baptist—an ordinary guy who left the signs and wonders to Jesus and simply declared an extraordinary message that the

light had come into the world. He was faithful to declaring the message—to share the truth. That was his sole focus and aim, and his ministry bore fruit.

This morning I want to look at *three* key things John the Baptist teaches us about being a witness to Christ. These aren’t the only things he can tell us, but I think they’re the most important. We see the *first* in the content of his message. St. John tells us in his Gospel that the Baptist’s message was *all about the light—all about Christ*. That’s the core of our witness too and if you aren’t sure what that means or what you would tell someone, consider that this central and important part of the message is something we not only affirm, but that we drill into our own minds every single Sunday when we recite the Creed. We affirm that Jesus Christ is the only Son of God; that he is eternally begotten of the Father; that he is God of God and Light of Light, true God from true God; that through him all things were made; that for us men and for our salvation he came down from heaven, was incarnate of the Virgin Mary; that for our sake he was crucified, suffered death and was buried; that on the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures; that he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father; and that he will come again to judge the living and dead.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones wrote about our mission this way: “We are meant to talk to people about the Lord Jesus Christ and to tell them he is the Son of God and that he has come into this world in order to save men and women.... We are meant to tell men exactly why the world is at it is; we are meant to tell them about sin in the human heart and that nobody and nothing can deal with it save the Son of God.... We are very ready to talk about our doctors, and to praise the man who cured us when so many failed; we talk about some business which is better than others, or about films and plays and actors and actresses, and a thousand and one other things. We are always glorifying people, the world is full of it, and the Christian is meant to be praising and glorifying the Lord Jesus Christ.”

That’s exactly what John did. If you go home this week and read the first part of each of the Gospels—where we read about John the Baptist—you’ll see that

John’s message was consistently and always about Jesus. He didn’t talk about his experiences with Jesus or about his feelings about God—it was all about Jesus *himself*. When he was baptising people in the Jordan and Jesus walked up, John declared, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29). We can and should share our own experiences of the Gospel, but *first and foremost our witness must be about the person and work of Jesus Christ*. Each of us in his or her own way needs to be declaring, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!”

Second, John teaches us something about the *how* of our witness. Look at John 1:8. We’re told there, “He was not the light.” John didn’t come to be the light, his mission was only to show it to people. Consider John’s response to the religious leaders when they asked him about his ministry. He told them: “I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know, even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie” (John 1:26-27). John was a popular and charismatic preacher. He could have claimed a lot of credit had he wanted to, but instead he deliberately directed the attention away from himself and put it on Jesus. This is important. Just as evangelism can drift into nothing more than a sharing of personal experience instead of a sharing of Jesus, evangelism can also drift into sharing ourselves instead of sharing Jesus. Yes, we bear the light of Christ in the world, but we need to remember that what we bear is the light *of Christ*. In fact, when Jesus said that John was a “burning and shining lamp” he described something that doesn’t burn on its own power. Look at the candles burning on the Communion Table right now. Those flames don’t burn on their own. Yesterday I had to refill the reservoirs in the candles with liquid paraffin because they were almost empty. One Sunday a couple of months ago the candles actually went out during the service because they ran out of paraffin. The flame doesn’t burn on its own. And for that matter, the flame doesn’t ignite on its own either. You’ve got to put a match or a taper to it to get it started burning in the first place. That’s what Jesus likened John to and that’s what we’re like. We’re just wicks. We won’t burn unless we’ve got Jesus himself to fuel us and to keep us fed and we won’t burn at all unless his

Holy Spirit ignites us. James Montgomery Boice, in his commentary on John's Gospel said something very true: "Whenever a Christian layman, minister, writer, teacher, or whoever it might be, gets to thinking that there is something important about him, he or she will always cease to be effective as Christ's witness." We need to remember that it's never about us and that we never live or share our faith on our own power; it's all about Jesus and by Jesus.

Finally, *third*, our goal in sharing Christ. St. John tells us in 1:7 that John the Baptist "came as a witness...*that all might believe* through him." It's surprising to me how often I forget something so simple. Our goal is "that all might believe." When we do share the Gospel, how often does our sharing degrade into an argument? Then we lose focus and instead of our goal being the winning of a lost soul it simply becomes winning an argument. There we are sharing the Gospel of grace and suddenly we realise that we're no longer being gracious ourselves. Or how often do we share the Gospel with someone not so much because we're truly concerned for their eternal well-being, but because we know we have a duty to tell them about Jesus? Our evangelism can become almost mechanical. We end up just going through the motions of witnessing, but we aren't really looking for or expecting a response. We don't follow up our sharing by praying for the person. When I was in University there was a guy who would show up about once a year on campus. He brought his own portable sound system and would stand on a box on the campus mall and "evangelise". I sat on the steps of a nearby building for an hour one afternoon and just watched. What he was really being was a jerk. People he didn't know would walk by and he'd angrily shout out things like, "Fornicator!" He'd mention Jesus a lot, but there wasn't much of the Gospel and there was absolutely no grace in it. It was like he was doing his duty of calling people to repentance, but nothing more. In this day and age it was refreshing to see a guy who wasn't afraid to talk about sin, but brothers and sisters, the point of pointing out sin is to then share the grace of God offered in Jesus Christ—and to model that grace while we tell others about it. If we would remember that our goal is that "all might believe" our evangelism would be full of grace and

I also think we'd be more ready to labour in prayer before and after our sharing.

Again, our evangelism is first to proclaim Jesus—his person and his work. Second we need to remember that it's not about us; it's about Jesus and that we share Jesus in the power of his Holy Spirit—not on our authority or on our own power, but with his. And third, our goal is that all might believe. It's not to win an argument; it's not to do our duty; it's to win lost souls for Jesus. And none of this should be hard if we've experienced his grace in our own lives and if we're living in that grace each and every day. Again, remember how ready we are to tell people about all the great, cool, and awesome things in our lives. Shouldn't we be even more ready to tell other people about Jesus? But therein lies the rub. Maybe the reason we don't tell people about Jesus is because we aren't living in his grace each day. We tell people about things like Macintosh Computers and Mr. Clean Magic Erasers because they're things that are part of our lives each day. Dear friends, it's a sad day when computers and cleaning products consume more of our being than the Lord Jesus does. If that's our problem, we know then that we need to spend more time in his grace, more time in his Word, more time meditating on God, on our Saviour, and on the good news of the Gospel and what it means for us. We need to spend more time actually *living* it and *experiencing* it, because the more we live it and the more we experience God's goodness, the more natural it's going to be for us share it with the people around us, just like we share all the other good things in our lives with them.

Please pray with me: Gracious heavenly Father, you've given us your only Son to die on the cross in order to pay the penalty for our sins. Through him you've given us new and everlasting life, you've given us your Holy Spirit and made us conquerors over sin and death. Forgive us for keeping your blessings to ourselves. Help us daily to live in your grace, to experience it, to know it, and to grow in thankfulness for it so that we will be increasingly ready to share your Good News with the people around us as naturally as we do so many other things that matter so little. Remind us that it's all about Jesus and that you have saved us and sent us into the world to tell others

that they might be saved too. Give us a concern for the lost and kindle our lights that they might shine brightly and bear witness to Jesus. We ask this in his name. Amen.