

# The Marriage of Telling and Living the Good News

## Article for Unit One

Should we focus on telling the gospel or on living it? Some want to limit the practice of evangelism to verbally proclaiming a message. Others see evangelism primarily as a way of living as God's people. Saint Francis is often quoted here: "Preach the gospel always; and, when necessary, use words."

If we examine the practice of the Early Church, however, we find a marriage between these two aspects of mission. Telling and living the gospel are inseparable.

### Speaking the Gospel

From the day of Pentecost onward, Acts pictures a Church that talked and taught the gospel of Christ. When forbidden to mention the name of Jesus publicly, Peter and John responded, "We cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard" (Acts 4:20). That courageous testimony continued throughout the Early Church.

#### 1. It focused on a story.

At the center of the message the early Christians shared was the sacred story of what God has done in Jesus in His saving death and resurrection from the dead. (See Acts 2:22-36; 4:10-12; 10:39-43; 13:27-39.)

#### 2. The way in which it could be told was flexible.

While the gospel story was constant, the way in which it was told was flexible. Compare Paul's preaching to a mainly Jewish audience in Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:13-52) to what he proclaimed to a group of educated philosophers in Athens (Acts 17:16-34). In the first case, Paul appealed to the Old Testament and showed that Jesus had fulfilled God's messianic promises. In Athens, Paul spoke of the Greeks' unknown god. He offered the message in a way they could comprehend. Yet, his focus was on Jesus, whom God raised from the dead.

#### 3. The Holy Spirit enabled the spreading of the gospel.

Jesus promised His followers power for witness through the gift of the Spirit (Acts 1:8). When the Spirit was poured out at Pentecost, representatives of all the nations heard the gospel in their own languages, and Peter preached the resurrection of the Lord (2:1-41). As opposition and persecution increased, the Holy Spirit empowered God's people to faithfully tell the story of Jesus. The result of this Spirit-enabled witness was that both Jews and Gentiles came to believe in Christ.

#### 4. Sharing the gospel was the whole Church's calling.

While apostles and evangelists like Peter, Philip, and Paul took the lead, sharing the good news was the calling of the whole Church. In his letter to the Philippians, Paul expected his friends to join him in telling the good news. He affirmed their "partnership in the gospel," which surely included their active involvement in passing on what they had received (Philippians 1:5). He commended the believers in Rome for speaking the word with boldness (1:14).

### Embodying the Gospel

New Testament evangelism was not only about speaking the gospel; it was about embodying the gospel.

#### 1. They "proclaimed" the good news through the quality of their shared life.

Descriptions of the Christian community after Pentecost (Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-37) show the evangelistic character of the Church's daily life. Practices, such as eating together, joyful worship, economic sharing, and caring for the poor, testified to the presence of God's kingdom rule in their midst. People were attracted by the Church's observable life together (Acts 2:47).

#### 2. There was a difference between the Church and the world.

Many of the practices of the Early Church pointed to a visible difference between the Church and the world. Giving a gift normally had strings attached. You gave to others in order to increase your own status. The gift placed them within your debt. When Christians freely shared their goods, caring for one another without a self-serving agenda, they raised the standard.

#### 3. The Church modeled inclusion rather than exclusion.

The first Jewish Christians did not start out eating with Gentiles. It was forbidden by the Jewish food laws. The breakthrough came when Peter discovered that "God does not show favoritism but accepts those from every nation who fear him" (10:34-35). The practice of Jews and Gentiles eating together showed how the gospel could break down walls of separation. The Church's fellowship came to model inclusion rather than exclusion, unity instead of division. Such radical behavior had to draw notice from a watching world.

Sometimes evangelism calls the Church to embrace values that run cross-grain to the world's familiar patterns. When Christians forgive their enemies, show hospitality to strangers, care for the needy, practice sexual purity, or endure suffering joyfully, they offer their non-believing neighbors a cross-shaped alternative to the prevailing values of the culture.

Living the gospel involved both doing (loving acts of service) and being (a holy character). Paul urged the Philippians to live in unity and moral integrity. Such caring relationships and embodied holiness enabled the Church's witness to shine forth like a piercing light in the darkness (Philippians 2:15). This contagious holiness also gave their verbal witness a stamp of authenticity.

### They Did Evangelism as the Missionary People of God

How did the Early Church do evangelism? Ultimately, by simply being the missionary people of God. Sometimes embodying Christ's presence in the world involved a verbal testimony to the good news. However at times, their most compelling witness came in the form of authentic lives, loving actions, and embracing relationships. The first Christians lived and told the transforming story of Jesus in the power of the Spirit. We can do no less.

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