

Christ Reformed Baptist Church – New Castle, IN
Sunday School Class Series: Inspiring & Maintaining Our
Personal Gospel Witness.

By: Pastor Doug Barger

PART TWO:

Understanding the unbeliever's conscience.

Last week we discussed several aspects related to our personal witness of the faith to those around us.

We started by observing that in Acts 8:1-4 the early Christians understood that an integral part of their new life in Christ (even under the most extreme forms of physical and mental persecution) was to 'evangelize'... simply meaning "personally witnessing" their Christian faith.

Furthermore; we observed, that this personal one-on-one way of sharing the gospel with others and inviting others to the house of God (to sit under the preached truth of God's word); is the most biblical, and successful method of spreading the gospel, despite what modern church growth experts tell us.

- 1. A Matter of Conviction**
- 2. A Matter of duty and conscience**
- 3. A Matter of Desire**
- 4. A Matter of Zeal**
- 5. A Matter of Prayer**
- 6. A Matter of forethought**
- 7. A Matter of skill and practice**
- 8. A Matter of patience**
- 9. A Matter of simplicity**

10. A Matter of spirituality and godliness

Prior to getting to the point and purpose of what I wish to share today, allow me to simply remind us all (in the context of the personal witnessing discussion) that God really does use us His people as instruments in the conversion of sinners. This is evident throughout all the NT and subsequent church history.

God uses his church; that is, you and me to proclaim, share, herald His truth to all the nations. It is through this active obedience on our part that His Spirit so chooses to operate upon the dead and hardened hearts of all the elect.

This understanding of our individual usefulness and instrumentality in the conversion of sinners is that of historic, mainstream Calvinism. For instance, this is the view so clearly expressed in the great confessions of faith of the 17th century. They all affirm that while God; yes, alone begins the work of conversion in the human soul by first imparting new-life (regeneration) it is also true that various other influences and instruments are employed alongside the awakened soul in the process of a person's conversion.

The biblical testimony is clear. The Holy Spirit uses our words of witnessing and preaching in the work of salvation.

We mustn't lose sight of this reality and our important part in it; for if we do, then it is possible that our zeal to do the ministry of personal witnessing will be greatly undermined. This has been the firm conviction of all the great preachers in times of reformation and revival and for us to witness effectively, we must share with them the certainty and worthwhileness of personal witnessing our faith with the world in which we live.

Now then, what I would like to do today in our time together is to encourage us in our work of personal witnessing by attempting to answer several questions when considering personal, effective, evangelism.

1. How much does the average unbeliever understand about the existence of God?
2. To what extent is he/she aware of their human sinfulness and need of forgiveness?
3. Must we find a way of 'intellectually' convincing our secular generation about the existence of God, and of the everlasting validity of fixed moral standards through some sort of superior debating skills?
4. Is it necessary to begin every witness encounter, with an attempt to prove by rational arguments that God is somewhere in existence out there?

Or...can we assume, that those who we shall encounter, those who are made in the image of God; despite their depravity, possess some awareness of God, and still have a conscience, the very thing that separates them from the animal kingdom?

THE SIMPLE AND DIRECT PERSONAL WITNESS OF PAUL TO FELIX

~ Well, to begin help shed some light on these questions, together let's turn our Bible to one of the most helpful and encouraging passages that records the Apostle Paul's testimony before Felix and his wife Drusilla beginning in Acts 24:24-25.

"And after certain days, when Felix came with his wife Drusilla, which was a Jewess, he sent for Paul, and heard him

concerning the faith in Christ. v25 and as he reasoned of righteousness, temperance, and the judgment to come, Felix trembled, and answered, go thy way for this time; when I have a convenient season, I will call for thee.”

Felix, was an utterly corrupt Roman ruler in Judea and Drusilla his wife, was a Jewess (being the daughter of King Herod Agrippa I). For our purposes, it’s important to know that Felix was steeped in Roman paganism of various sorts and had built a terrible reputation for cruelty and violence. In fact, to aid in our understanding of who was it that Paul was witnessing to; Felix was the second husband to Drusilla (she deserted her first husband to marry Felix).

Now, we might imagine, for example, that Paul would have to spend many hours proving that there was only one holy and just God in contrast to the multiplicity of all the other spiritual worldviews surrounding Felix. We might imagine how Paul would set about to explain to Felix that so many things in his life were rather sinful and have special difficulty communicating the concept of a future day of terrible judgement for such sins.

What, does the Bible teach us of how Paul dealt with this abnormally proud, and vicious man who is was so lost in various pagan ideas and worldviews? Do we learn here in the text that Paul felt it was appropriate to first establish the intellectual reasonableness of the Christian faith prior to getting to the personal witnessing of the gospel?

No, he doesn’t. And his example is very relevant to us today, in our godless, multi-racial, multi-cultural society.

The almost astonishing fact is...that Paul when straight to the point and spoke about Gospel matters.

We know this by the little Greek verb translated in the AV “reasoned” which literally means “laid out” or “thoroughly” presented the matter.

What issue did he lay out before Felix and Drusilla? Well, the text tells us: ‘righteousness (rather lack thereof), temperance (self-control), and of the judgement to come’. In other-words he gave an extremely direct and challenging gospel witness.

What I don’t want us to miss; particularly with regard to Paul’s personal witness recorded here, is Paul proceeded on the assumption that as he described these things, Felix would have had little difficulty in understanding what it was he was communicating...in other words, Paul was convinced that Felix had a conscience which had branded upon it the very image of God (namely His Moral Code) which through many choices had been beaten to near complete silence and suppression by Felix, but none the less...Paul used the gospel to directly challenge his enslaved conscience.

Paul, evidences for us here that he believes that through his instrumentation, the truth of the gospel itself could effectively begin to stir Felix’s conscience.

The Apostle’s witness was unashamedly religious, and he certainly did not attempt some elaborate apologetic approach. Nor do we see him attempt to disprove Roman idols or other false worldviews. No, he simply swept them all to the side.

We for our purposes today, that Paul dealt directly with this sinner’s immediate, desperate need of forgiveness and the converting power of Christ.

Before moving on, it's important for us to observe that Paul's unimpressive personal witness did not bounce off this powerful and hard-hearted Roman, as we might have expected...no, rather the AV says that 'Felix trembled'.

Teaching us that despite the Roman ruler's secular lifestyle, and the fact that he had been raised in an entirely different worldview, Paul's affirmative personal witness of the truth, was effectively used by the Spirit and struck home with such penetrating power that he was seized with great fear.

This account has enormous significance for us, particularly in an age when most societies have largely reverted back to the various spiritual and mystical worldviews that have been recycled over the centuries of recorded history.

In such an environment where many people no longer believe that sinful acts are sinful (but only relevant to your own opinion, so long as it doesn't harm another person), or where God doesn't really exist...we as Christians are inclined to think that we must PROVE that God is out there, and that sin is really sin.

Paul however, simply declared the truth about God (righteousness) the truth about sin (temperance) and the truth about final judgement. He described the Gospel remedy, pressed the pressure point, and pleaded with people to repent.

We can say with certainty that didn't emphasize the 'rational' or 'apologetic' approach, as though the pagan mind needed deliverance from a mountain of intellectual obstruction for Felix could understand or believe. No, he spoke as though the unbelieving mind could understand what he was saying regardless of whether they had ever heard of such things.

Take away this from Paul and apply it: don't think that every point of the Gospel must be entirely and rationally proved before it can have any effect upon the person whom you are talking to. By doing so, you impose upon yourself a huge extra burden of duty, not to mention much discouragement. People, although depraved...are still people and not beasts, and as such they are sufficiently capable of understanding the claims and demands of the gospel message and will be held accountable by God on the day of judgement for their rejection of it.

ONE OF OUR GREATEST AIDS IN PERSONAL WITNESS – God's judgement upon them will be administered as people who knew what they were doing was sinful and wrong.

Paul describes unbelievers as people who 'are contentious, and do not obey the truth' (Rom. 2:8-11) "But unto them that are contentious, and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, indignation and wrath" v.9 Tribulation and anguish, upon every soul of man that doeth evil, of the Jew first, and of the Gentile; v10 but glory, honor, and peace, to every man that worketh good, to the Jew first, and to the Gentile: v11 for there is no respect of persons with God.

They will be punished with 'indignation and wrath' because their actions are carried out very deliberately and in the light of clear awareness. This is the case whether the person is an 'enlightened' Jew or a totally pagan gentile. So then, knowing that awareness and sensitivity are present, we, like Paul are encouraged in our own personal witness to step across the very threshold of their conscience and share the Gospel of our Redeemer.

The strongest possible confirmation of all these things is given by the inspired apostle himself in Rom. 2:12-15.

“For as many as have sinned without law shall also perish without law: and as many as have sinned in the law shall be judged by the law; 13 (For not the hearers of the law are just before God, but the doers of the law shall be justified. 14 For when the Gentiles, which have not the law, do by nature the things contained in the law, these, having not the law, are a law unto themselves: 15 Which shew the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts the mean while accusing or else excusing one another;)”

Are gentile idolaters like Felix back in Act 24 really capable of understanding so much of what we will say during personal witness opportunities regarding God, sin and judgement?

Can people with no religious background or ardent and hardened atheists really be expected to understand their sinfulness?

Well...Paul's words here provide the answer:

This passage speaks NOT of one, but two ‘faculties’ within every person (even while unregenerate) and both of these carry the imprint of God's standards. God has written the standards of righteousness in the heart, and as if that were not enough, He has

also created the independent faculty of conscience to bear witness to those standards.

In other words, all human beings have instincts, plus a permanent, resident ‘magistrate’ (or better – ‘counsel for the prosecution’) accusing them of transgressions. So, their inner thoughts are frequently thrown into conflict – the conscience accusing, and the rest of the mind excusing and justifying, their sin.

And so, for our purposes today we need to remember in our personal witnessing...when we witness for Christ, we direct our words to minds and hearts which have been the scene of many an inner battle!

Even where the conscience has been bludgeoned into submission and inactivity, it has been (to some degree) sensitive in the past, and so may...(by God’s grace, through your truthful words) be stirred up again.

No human being can ever COMPLETELY forget that he is a sinner in God’s sight.

And final confirmation of this fact is given when Paul refers to the day of judgement as the day – ‘when God shall judge the secrets of men’ (Rom. 2:16) “In the day when God shall judge **the secrets of men** by Jesus Christ according to my gospel”.

Secrets here refer to things which are covered up or concealed. Every sinner has secrets. Every heart has a history of thoughts and deeds which are concealed from everyone’s view except God.

No person on earth may know our most secret guilt, but we know it. The stench of guilt hangs particularly heavily on those things which we hide away, but one day all those secrets will be disclosed.

That vital word secret is a ringing reminder of the fact that we know what we are guilty of, even as unregenerate people. We do not merely have sins, we have secrets, for we know what we have done, and the fear of shame forces us to hide it from view.