

America: The New Mission Field

Evangelism 101

By Dr. Jeff Meyers

sermonaudio.com

Preached On: Monday, January 7, 2021

Crossroads Ministries

301 S. 8th Street

Opelika, Alabama 36801

Website: www.fbcopelika.com

Online Sermons: www.sermonaudio.com/jeffmeyers

I want to take advantage of this opportunity kind of as a complementary study to study more of a subject matter more than a specific text, and the subject is one of those that we just presume that everybody does and when you presume everybody does it, that means nobody does it, it's called evangelism. And so this summer we may not be necessarily walking through specific texts and specific chapters like we typically would in a sermonic form but we're going to cover almost the entirety of the New Testament over the course of the summer to see what does the Bible say about sharing the gospel both privately and publicly.

Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, as we embark on this endeavor, Lord, we are reminded again that your last words unto us were to go. Lord, as we walk through the scriptures, as we look at the world around us, even as we study history, Lord, may you put within each and every one of us a greater desire to see the lost saved. It is in the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

Well, in any study of what we know of evangelism, it is rightly fitting to hear what the Lord Jesus Christ himself said to us concerning the matter. In the book of Acts 1, we have chronologically the last words of Jesus Christ. Now I realize that each of the gospels ends, some very overtly such as Matthew, some very subtly like the gospel of John with what we call a Great Commission. Let me remind us from the very beginning when we talk about evangelism, we call it the Great Commission, not the great permission. We have not been given permission to share, we have been given a commission to share.

In Acts 1 just moments before his ascension, we have this dialog between the disciples and Jesus Christ. Beginning in verse 4 of chapter 1 of Acts it says,

4 And, being assembled together with them, commanded them that they should not depart from Jerusalem, but wait for the promise of the Father, which, saith he, ye have heard of me. 5 For John truly baptized with water; but ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost not many days hence. 6 When they therefore were come together, they asked of him, saying, Lord, wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel? 7 And he said

unto them, It is not for you to know the times or the seasons, which the Father hath put in his own power. 8 But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.

Now I want to be clear, Jesus was not dismissing a study of the end times, what we might call eschatology. They obviously were very curious, "Is this when it's all going to end? Is this how all the prophecies that we've read and studied throughout the years, is the timeline?" He did not dismiss it but he said there is a more primary concern for your life. Obviously a study of end times is relevant to our lives but in verse 8 he says when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, you are to be my witnesses. This was a command to a group of Jewish fishermen, primarily such, in Judea 2,000 years ago, and as a believer in Jesus Christ, it is the command to each and every one of us this very day.

Again, when we talk about evangelism, we tend to assume that that's what we all do, right? We're all evangelists in some manner but one of the things I've learned in life is when you presume that everybody's doing it, that means that nobody is doing it. And so as we discuss evangelism, even though it is a worldwide commandment and commission as we read here in Acts 1, because most of you and most of those watching online have a North American context, a Western civilization context, there may be some outside of the Western civilization, but I want to be very strategic in this study talking about evangelism not so much going over there as much as what is right here and the Lord has given each and every one of us.

Tonight's title may seem somewhat daunting, "America: The New Mission Field." When we think of the mission field, we always think somewhere over there, right? We always think of missionaries who take everything they own and put it in a few bags and they get on a boat or a plane and we hope to some day see them again, yet when we do a study of evangelism, we realize that the mission field may simply be 30 steps across the street. It may be the cubicle next to us. It may be the stranger that we run across providentially. Tonight, I want to give you two aspects about America as a new mission field: a reality check and a realization.

Here is the reality check. I'm going to quote Reggie McNeil, "The North American church is suffering from severe mission amnesia. It has forgotten why it exists." Now let me address that from two perspectives. You and I here tonight, we live in a culture wherein God has moved so mightily so many times we actually give numerals to the Awakenings, the first Great Awakening, the second Great Awakening, and there have been many more throughout our time in our history. We are of the byproduct, we are the beneficiaries of God moving in so many incredible manners, in fact, the Layman's Prayer Revival right before what we know as the Civil War, had 1.5 million people saved in 18 months. If you want to give a population comparison, that would be like the entire state of Texas today getting saved in 18 months. An incredible move of God. This is our heritage. This is our backstory, so to speak. We seem to have forgotten that geographically speaking, if you take out the Middle East of the first couple of centuries,

the Lord has moved more mightily on this land and from this land than any other place 2,000 years since the empty tomb. In fact, most of the missionary movements, agencies and organizations that we are not only partnering with but grateful to contribute to in some manner corporately or individually, have their roots in what we call the Missionary Movement of the 18-19th century which, you'd be willing to guess, is primarily centered, yes, here in what we know as the North American continent, particularly Western civilization.

You know, Charles Dickens in his book "The Tale of Two Cities," may have illustrated our world best. The first line, one of the most famous first lines of any novel, "It was the best of times. It was the worst of times." You and I as believers in Jesus Christ, we're living in the best of times. We have access to technology like never before. As we roll out of what we know as a global pandemic, you and I discovered very quickly how valuable technology was to us in these last days, and I don't mean technology as far as information gathering as much as it was for us gathering as believers, connecting with believers. The ability to have prayer meetings online, the ability to do Bible studies on line, the ability not just to see somebody from across the street or across the county but to have someone who lived on a completely different continent be a part of a Bible study, a worship service, a prayer meeting in real time without any delay. I know it is somewhat trite but can you imagine what the Apostle Paul could have done with the technology of today. Rather than spending countless days and weeks traveling from one location to the next, they could have just simulcast it all at one time. The technology that we have access to.

How about the facilities? We are blessed people not just in this specific location but the church of Jesus Christ in the North American continent, we are blessed. In fact, we have buildings in abundance. We have properties of incredible value. We're able to place incredible numbers of people into locations, even going through a pandemic, we were able to socially distance because we had the space. You look at the early church and there were a few exceptions to the rule, there were a couple of churches such as Ephesus that had large facilities and could hold thousands of people, but there's a reason in the book of Acts it says they went from house to house. They didn't have the means, they didn't have the access to the facilities that you and I do today.

The finances. You know, it's interesting, in Acts 15 we have what we call the Jerusalem Council. There were those Jewish believers and Gentile believers coming together saying, "How are we going to figure this thing out? How are we going to partner together? How are we going to be the church?" And sure, there were some things they had to, you know, decide as far as no fornication and nothing offered with blood and such, but do you remember the final part? Be sure that you collect the finances to help the poor. Be sure that we raise the money to do ministry. And yet what we know as the church of Jesus Christ, at least in our culture, has an overwhelming abundance of finances. It's not the fact that we don't have them, it's are we willing to give them.

And finally, just a simple capability. From a human perspective, from a fleshly perspective, there is no goal, there is no ambition, there is nothing that we don't have the resources and yet it is the worst of times. When we look at the world around us today, the

impact and the influence that the church of Jesus Christ in this context and culture is having on behalf of the gospel, lackluster is too nice of a word. In fact, next week when we gather, I'm going to give you some statistics and some charts to show you just how dire straits that we are in. You would think the more access to resources, you would think the greater our facilities, you would think with the abundance of finances that this would be the time where more individuals were coming to saving faith in Jesus Christ than any other time in our history. Allow me to share with you that if you look at the statistics, we currently are actually reaching less people than any time since what we know as World War II. It's a travesty. All the resources and so little impact.

You know, each of us has those books that we have read that have made great impact on our lives. I've been through numerous conversations where people have said outside of the Bible if you could pick three books, five books, 10 books, what would the most impactful influential books be? Well, if you were to ask me in the last 10 years the most influential book that I have read outside of the Bible itself, I would choose a book entitled "The Great Evangelical Recession." It was written by John Dickerson some years ago. Here is the premise of his writing. Many of us remember the days of 2007-2008, there was great economic recession. By the way, for those of you who are not familiar with terminology, the difference between a depression and a recession, a recession is when your neighbor loses their job, a depression is when you lose your job, all right? There we have the differences in the two terminologies there. But we called that time period the great economic recession, and over time I've spoken with many individuals that were in the field of finance and banking and all the industries that suffered so much casualties during that time period.

Here's a question that I have personally asked them that he asked individuals in his book. I was just making sure the research was solid: if you could go back to 2006-2007 and change anything as someone involved in finances, banking, mortgages, what would you change? Do you know what the most common answer given is? Everything. Why? Because even though the economy at that time period looked like it was strong, it was a false front. The fundamentals were not there. There was a lot of smoke. There was a lot of mirrors. There was a lot of perception but when everything was on the call, so to speak, we discovered it wasn't as strong and it wasn't as solid as we thought.

In this book, he looks at the Western church, what you and I are a part of today primarily, and he claims that we are eerily a parallel to the same situation, not economically but spiritually. We've got the greatest facilities, the biggest budgets, the latest in technology. It appears that everything is going the right direction. In his book, he addresses six areas that we believe we're excelling in that the statistics show otherwise. One of those areas is we believe that we're a lot bigger than we really are. We believe there's a lot more believers than there really are. We believe that we're better liked than we really are. We believe we're more popular than we really are. You see, one of the problems and this is important to our study of evangelism, is once a believer in Jesus Christ has been a believer for 3-4 years, most of their inner circle of influence and friendships are fellow believers, and so we believe falsely that everything's headed the right direction because

most of those whom we interact with are of the same mindset, the same worldview. We don't see what it really looks like out there.

If you'll forgive me for using a somewhat political analogy and illustration. Some years ago there was a book written in regards to the biasness of the media. It was written by a former executive of one of the major news networks here in America. And there's a story in there about the 1972 presidential race where Richard Nixon won 48 out of 50 states. Up until 1980 and Ronald Reagan's victory, I'm sorry, 1984, it was the largest victory as far as electoral college and popular vote we'd seen as a culture and country. And here he was an executive of a news station and he actually cited in his book on air one of the broadcasters of his network made this statement, "How did Richard Nixon ever win? I don't know anybody who voted for him." Is that not how we, as the church, are? How could this world be doing what it's doing? I don't know anybody who believes that. I don't know anybody who advocates that. I don't know anybody who thinks that. You see, the problem is we think that we're more influential, we think we're more impactful, we think we're more liked than we really are because we're huddled up with those of like mindedness.

Dickerson makes this statement, "The actual number of Evangelical Christians is far less than we've been told, accounting for 7-8.9% of the United States population. Not 40% and certainly not 70." Why is that statement critical? Because if you were to just go around and survey other believers, people who are active in their faith and say, "What percentage of America do you think are believers in Jesus Christ?" The range of numbers goes from 40-70%, and particularly when you're in what we know as the Bible Belt where we look around and we know folks not only by where they live but where they go to church. And we just presume or assume that roughly half, maybe even more than half, of our culture has some type of faith base.

But notice the term "Evangelical Christian." Now let me take the politicization out of that term. What is an Evangelical Christian? Allow me to make this very simple for you: an Evangelical Christian is someone who believes the Bible is true, believes that Jesus Christ was born of a virgin, lived a sinless life, died a sacrificial death, rose bodily from the grave, and is returning again. Now can we confess in our context, that's what Vacation Bible School is going to teach this week, correct? That's the basics. That's the simple message. And yet according to the data, whether from a sacred perspective or a secular perspective, look at the numbers, 7-8.9%. That's it.

I spoke of the state of Texas earlier as a comparative. If you take the population of the United States of America today, if you're to be generous at 9%, it's the population of the state of Texas. A great state, a huge state, but not when you compare it to the other 49 combined. You and I today live in a world that is not near as saturated with the gospel of Jesus Christ than most of us would presume.

The latest data is out. More churches are closing their doors than are opening their doors, meaning church or new church starts. We live in a world where 100 years ago when cities and towns were being established, at the crossroads of the intersection of Main and

Whatever Street you typically would have a Baptist church, a Methodist church, a Presbyterian church, and whoever got split off those other churches on the other corner. And yet today, cities and towns and communities, those churches are being used for other purposes or have very limited numbers of people involved.

Dickerson also makes this statement. He says, "Somewhere along the way unofficially and probably with good intentions, our ministry leaders began counting dollars instead of disciples. Whether intentional or not, dollar dependence in our host culture has led to an assumed dependence on the dollar to fulfill a commission that originally had nothing to do with material wealth." You know, as a lifelong Baptist, there's an old joke: if you want to know how healthy a church is, just look at the three B's. You say, "What are the three B's?" The bottoms in the seat, the bucks in the plate, and the baptism in the water. And yet anybody can grow a large crowd. It doesn't mean there's biblical centeredness. It doesn't mean there's evangelism taking place. After all, sporting events grow large crowds. Just because there happens to be an abundance of finances, there's all kinds of organizations and entities that have large gifts of finances. Obviously, hopefully baptism would be an indicator of spiritual vitality, and as we're going to look at next week, as a whole collectively those numbers are trending in the wrong direction.

It's a tough reality check, isn't it? In a place that birthed Awakenings, in a place that is known for a history of revivals, in a place where institutions of learning and medical centers often have church faith-based names, we now find ourselves where less than 10% of our culture can be claimed an Evangelical born again Christian. If there's ever been a need for evangelism, it is now. So what's the realization? The realization is that there are a lot of lost people in America. You know, we tend to think, "Let's go unto the lost. Let's be missionaries. Let's be evangelistic." We tend to think somewhere else a long ways away.

Some years ago during the summer season, I had a young man at the church I was pastoring at the time who was put on appointment by the International Mission Board to serve as a summer missionary in Kenya. Can I just share with you what this young man's job was? One of the neatest assignments I've ever heard of. His assignment was to get on a bicycle because of the village constructs in the area, and he was to ride out about two weeks in advance of the missionaries that you and I support, and the purpose of his riding out was to go to each one of these villages and he basically was to do a study how many people lived there, how many men, how many women, how many children, and to do to the best of his ability a number of born again believers versus non-believers. That was his role for the entire summer so that when the missionaries would come in, they would know in advance that this community is 90% lost, 50% lost, it's mostly men that are saved, it's mostly women that are saved. They would know how to approach the community. You know, the most frightening thing when he returned back to the states and gave his report is he shared with us that the statistical number of believers on his route in Kenya was almost identical to the United States of America. You see, we think of the mission field as somewhere out there when the realization is the mission field is right here.

Some years ago, Tom Clegg and Warren Bird, both researchers, wrote a book entitled "Lost in America." I won't share tonight all the statistics and all the conclusions but I want to share with you the introduction. Why would two men write a book about being lost in America? What would inspire them to do so? Well, one of these individuals found himself in New York City. He was there for a conference. He was there just to do the things that he does. He found himself on mass transportation, the subway system, and there as he was going to and fro and connecting with all the trains and such, he came across three young men. They were in their late teens or early 20s, and when he observed them from a distance, he could tell they were believers, the language they used, the words they were using. Even though their English was somewhat broken, he could understand. He looked at that which they were carrying and he noticed from his observation that they were believers and so he conjured up the courage and, you know, the means of traveling, he pulled these young men aside and he began to just talk with them, just ask them about who they were, and he found out very quickly they were believers. His natural instinct was to ask them based on the luggage and such, "Oh, are you preparing to go on the mission field for the summer?" And they said, "Yes, sir." He said, "Where?" They said, "New York City." All three of these individuals actually resided on another continent and had come to this continent to share the gospel.

A hundred, 200 years ago, nobody from anywhere else ever came here to share the gospel. We sent them out from here and now other continents are sending missionaries here. When we look at the commandment to go forth and share the gospel, hear me very clearly, there is nothing wrong with going overseas, there is nothing wrong with going to the ends of the earth, nothing at all, but one of the things I think we may need to realize is that that's not the only mission field. The mission field exists in our own backyard, in our own communities. It's not just those areas that have little to no witness, it's even in what we know as the Bible Belt. Can we confess tonight the Bible Belt evangelistically has gotten rusted? It's begun to rust.

What did he tell us in Acts 1:8? He says when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, go. I want you to notice the first place he said: Jerusalem. Your backyard. Where the gospel started. And so I want to encourage you tonight as we study the concept or the idea of evangelism, to not limit our idea to somewhere else, not limit our idea to another entity or another group but realize that this commission and this commandment is just as relevant for our culture and our context here as it is anywhere else and, in fact, it may be just as relevant or more so here than other places.