

Evangelism in the Book of Acts

Evangelism 101

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Tonight as we're going to address the issue of evangelism in the book of Acts, but just work with me, I want to set the stage because as we all know, the book of Acts is kind of a history of the early church. In Romans 5:6 it says, "For when we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly." Tonight as we walk through the book of Acts, we're going to see that of all the other time periods in the history of the world, there was no better time for the person of Jesus Christ to come to be Incarnated, to live, to die, and to be raised from the dead than that which we will study tonight.

Let us pray.

Heavenly Father, tonight as we see your word from kind of a 30,000 foot view, Lord, may we not relegate it simply to a thousand years of history, may we not see it simply as that was then but this is now but, God, may we see that even though we're not walking literally side-by-side with the apostles, even though we're not there when those early believers first heard the message, Lord, may you continue in our lives tonight that which you began many years ago, the redemptive process of bringing men and women, boys and girls, unto yourself. It is in the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

Tonight as we continue our study of evangelism, as we look at that subject matter that not only means to proclaim or to preach or to share the gospel of Jesus Christ, that last commission that the Lord gave us in each and all of the gospels, even though the gospel of John is more of a narrative than it is a "Great Commission" passage, tonight we're going to study probably the one book of the New Testament that in its totality gives us an idea or a picture of what we know as evangelism probably better than any other. It's what we know as the book of Acts. Historically it gives us the time period of the first couple of decades of what we know as the church of Jesus Christ. Personalities, some of the greatest figures known to the faith. But before we look at respective passages, one thing that's so critical about what we know as the book of Acts, that early church 2,000 years ago, is the preparation for the gospel that was laid before even the chronology begins.

It happened in a place that we know as Rome and we look at ancient Rome 2,000 years ago, it had roads that had been fortified and designed and engineered like none other. In fact, as you know the old adage, all roads lead to Rome. The ability to travel was unmatched from any time leading up unto this point. The early apostles, the early

disciples were able to move not only within what we know as the Middle East but even throughout the middle of the book of Acts you see by the time they get to Acts 16, they've already found their way to Europe, an entire other continent that even hundreds of years earlier would have been unfathomable in that timeframe. And then there's the language, the language of which though everybody had their own dialect and had their own way of communicating, the language of Rome had a unique means in the sense that almost everywhere you went in the known world in that day, you were still able at some level to communicate because of the authority, the realm, the spectrum of technology, sociology and linguistics of Rome. The world had been unified in some respects so that the gospel was at a time and a moment in history where it could be propagated as seamlessly as possible.

Two other aspects in preparation. 1. The Jewish people who all the way back from the book of Genesis had been anticipating, had been awaiting, had been desiring the coming of whom we know as the Messiah Jesus Christ. In the book of Romans 3, it begins by saying the one advantage that the Jewish people have is that they've had the gospel message, they've had the scriptures for thousands of years. For thousands of years they had waited in anticipation, for thousands of years they hoped and desired and even that last book of the Old Testament, the book of Malachi, said that the Lord would be silent for 430 years but, oh, when he would speak again. You had a group of people who had been anticipating, desiring and hoping for the Messiah figure maybe more than ever before.

And then you had the spiritual vacuum of whom we know as the Gentiles, most of our, shall we say, ancestors. In Romans 5:6 it makes this statement, "For when we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly." You know, there's an old statement that's been attributed to a theologian of days gone by that says each and every one of us has a God-shaped vacuum within us that only God can fill. Can I remind you of the story of Jesus in Caesarea Philippi. There he was on that northern coast and he asked a very simple question, "Who do people say that I am?" Then he asked the disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" Which interesting, is the setting of that story. They were not on the sea of Galilee, they were not outside the temple in Jerusalem, in Caesarea Philippi, that was the place where all the world's religions gathered together. It was almost as if not only communication was seamless, travel was seamless, talking was seamless, but the ability to experience, to hear about and to know about all faiths was as simple as going to one simple spot and they were all represented. Why is this critical? Because when you and I look at the book of Acts, when we see the gospel story lived out, when we see it proclaimed, in God's providence and as only he can do, there was no historical time more better fit for what we know as the Incarnation than 2,000 years ago.

So what was the strategy? What was the strategy that the Lord implored us in the book of Acts? It's one of those strategies, it is so simplistic I think sometimes we miss it. In Acts 1:8, the last statement that Jesus gives his followers, the last statement he gives us, he says, "Go you into all the world, into Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the uttermost parts of the earth." Why is this important? Two reasons. 1. Total penetration. He says go into all the world, not the world that you like, not the world that's convenient, not the world

that's affluent, not the world that's easy. He said go into all the world. The gospel message was designed by God to penetrate every single soul, in every single place, in every single language, in spite of what we may or may not think of those individuals. Total penetration. The second thing is total participation, go ye into all the world. That is a plural word. We've talked about in recent days about how oftentimes we relegate the sharing of the gospel to simply saying, "Well, that's not for me. That's for somebody else. It's for these folks but not those individuals."

So the strategy of the book of Acts when it comes to evangelism is very simple: total penetration to all the world, total participation involving all people who are believers in Jesus Christ. Specifically in Acts 1:8, he says when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. It's personal. When we speak about evangelism, we can speak about events, we can speak about watching films, we can speak about all means that we use to propagate the message but at the end of the day, as we've shared earlier, it is one beggar telling another beggar where to find food. Evangelism is very personal but it's also very powerful. What gives us the ability to share the gospel message? It says when the Holy Spirit is come upon you. The power to share, the ability to see a life transformed isn't because of your ability to articulate or a strategy that you have memorized, it is the power of the Holy Spirit moving and operating in your lives. And here's the very simple plan, he said begin at Jerusalem, then go to Judea, into Samaria, and to the uttermost parts of the earth.

Now tonight I'm going to share with you somewhat of a chart. This is a picture. There's going to be lots of boxes, lots of words, lots of references and such, but I think this is the best way to share with you the total penetration and the total participation of the gospel witness in the book of Acts. I've selected three very critical passages for us to address. Now for the sake of time, we won't go and read these passages. Hopefully you're very familiar with them.

The first one is Acts 2. This is the famous Pentecost event. This is the passage where the Holy Spirit so demonstrated himself that the church was made visible to the world around. Acts 8. Acts 8 is where the gospel went to the Samaritans for the very first time, those that were considered worse than unclean. They were beyond just "the other side of the tracks." Then there's Acts 10 where we see the gospel going forth to the Gentiles and eventually to the uttermost parts of the earth.

You'll notice on this chart that I've given key aspects of the passages, the principal characters that are involved, the participants who would hear the message, the "laying on of hands," the pouring out of the Holy Spirit, the utilization of what the Bible calls tongues, and obviously what we know as baptism.

Now the reason for me giving you this chart is twofold. 1. To show you what it is not. 2. To show you what it is. Allow me simply to explain. If you'll notice when you look at this chart, that the participants, who was it that was hearing the gospel message? In Acts 2 it says Jews from every nation. In Acts 8 it was the Samaritans, in particular, a man by the name of Simon who was a sorcerer. In Acts 10 a man by the name of Cornelius and the Gentiles. Why is this important? Because the book of Acts if you look at it from a

30,000 foot view, it follows the plan that Jesus laid out. He said the gospel would begin in Jerusalem and Judea, it would go to Samaria, and eventually to the uttermost parts of the earth, and so you see the gospel going forth exactly as Jesus told us it would.

One of the things that I find interesting is that the only one of the passages that remotely even involves the "laying on of hands" in the gospel presentation is in Acts 8 with the Samaritans but not in chapter 2 or 10. I'll get to that in just a moment.

And when it comes to the Holy Spirit, this is something I want to draw your attention to. You'll notice on the chart in Acts 2, the Holy Spirit came after they were baptized. In Acts 8, it takes place after the hands were laid upon them. And in Acts 10, it came while they were preaching and teaching. Again, hold on with me, that'll be important in just a moment when I talk about what it is not.

When you look at the issue of "speaking or hearing in tongues," an issue that we must confess is often more distracting to the gospel than it is edifying to it, you'll notice that those who "spoke in tongues" in Acts 2 were the preachers, Acts 8 it was nobody, and Acts 10 it was the participants or the hearers.

Why do I share all this information with you? Because oftentimes when it comes to the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ, there are multiple issues that, shall we say, get in the way of talking about the most important matter and that's Jesus Christ. We talk about the laying on of hands, we talk about the speaking in tongues or the hearing in tongues, and then we talk about the ordinance or the issue of baptism. What I want you to see first is what the book of Acts demonstrates that it is not, that in these three accounts whether it's the Jewish people, the Samaritans and the Gentiles, none of them have a consistent message in regard to the issue of laying on of hands, none of them have a consistent issue when it comes to the speaking in tongues, and none of them have a consistent issue when it comes to the issue of baptism which means this, that the gospel is not about those things. They are secondary issues. They are important issues but they are not the issue. What is the issue? The issue that irrespective of hands, irrespective of tongues, irrespective of baptism, that the person of Jesus Christ was spoken of clearly, the issue of sin was addressed specifically, and humanity no matter what their heritage, what their background, what their struggle may be came to saving faith in relationship in the Lord through the person of Jesus Christ alone.

When it comes to the book of Acts, specifically when it comes to what we know as evangelism, I think oftentimes there are distractions on all the other issues, and there are times that we want to make a secondary issue or even a third level issue the primary issue, but when you take a step back in the book of Acts, oftentimes that which we spend the majority of our time talking about is not the most important message that is there. So whether it be in Jerusalem, whether it be in Samaria, whether it be with Cornelius, to the uttermost parts of the earth, the one consistent thread is that Jesus Christ was preached, sin was confessed, and salvation took place in the hearers' lives.

So how do we translate this to our world today? How do we take the story of 2,000 years ago, how do we take the witness of the apostles and the early believers, and how do we allow that to be somewhat of a metric for our own lives? Let's look at the witness of the believers not just in the book of Acts but every day since.

1. They preached their faith. Well, we would expect us to make that declaration because you see it in all of those respective passages.

Secondly, they lived their faith. You know, one of the great statements, one of the old adages that I don't know if we know the original source to, you may have heard this before, is, "I can't hear what you're saying because your actions are too loud." One of the things we see in the book of Acts is it wasn't just a preaching about Jesus, they were willing to back their words up with actions. When the early apostles said, "We would rather obey God than man," they allowed themselves to be imprisoned for their faith. They didn't just give it lip service, they actually lived it out.

They formed churches. I know this would seem just elementary to us but it's very relevant. You see what we know as the letters of the Apostle Paul being birthed out of the book of Acts. Whether it is in a location known as Thessalonica, Philippi, wherever it may be, the people of faith have a natural propensity to gather together as believers, in gathering they testify, they share and they go forth.

This next thing may be more relevant than we want to give it credit: they were not willing to change the message. They didn't water it down. They didn't turn it into easy-believism. They didn't somehow, somehow say, "Well, according to a new day and a new way, I guess we can do it differently." They were not willing to change the message. As I've stated before, the great evangelist Billy Graham made a profound statement some years ago. He said the methodology in which we share the message must always be changing, the message must never change. We hear tonight about the Jesus film, yet 200 years ago we couldn't use that methodology because technology-wise it did not exist. It might have been the Jesus play but it wasn't the Jesus film. Today we utilize apps on our phone and videos that we wouldn't have even used 2-3 decades ago. Just because technology allows access or communication can be broadcast online versus being relegated to a geographical place does not mean the message ever changes.

They testified to their change. You know, it's interesting when you read the testimony of the Apostle Paul in the book of Acts, it didn't matter if he was in front of a group of people who he had just been introduced to, or he was in front of a great Roman leader, every time he told the exact same story.

And they did all this in the midst of great obstacles. Tonight I want to share the two obstacles that the early church persevered through that you and I need to be willing to do so as well. Again, we could discuss this at length, we could use dozens of illustrations. Hopefully tonight I've relegated it somewhat to some simplistic application. As the church of Jesus Christ with the commission to share the gospel of Jesus Christ, what are the inward obstacles with in the family of faith? What is it that we're going to battle

against more than anything else? Number 1 has been and always will be hypocrisy, that aspect of not living out what we claim to believe. Whether it's Galatians 2 where Paul called out Peter for being a noneffective witness to the Jewish people, or Matthew 7 where Jesus made it very clear, "Do not judge lest you be judged, for with what judgment you give and render, it shall be done unto you." Every passage that we discover shares with us this challenge, that it's always a great difficulty to live out that which we preach and that which we proclaim. Study after study shows that the number 1 reason, at least in the Western world, for people rejecting and not receiving the message of Jesus Christ has been for years and continues to be at least their observation of hypocrisy. "Why would I believe, why would I adhere to something that they claim to believe but can't even and don't even do themselves?"

The second inward obstacle is what we might call ministry needs. Acts 15, we addressed this, this morning, the issue of what we know as the Jerusalem Council, the Jewish believers, the Gentile believers learning how to navigate their faith in tandem with each other. One of the reasons was not only to come to an agreement of what secondary issues would be made for both sides but there were those that were struggling physically, there were those that didn't have the food that was necessary, the shelter that was necessary, and one of the things that we've learned throughout the years, it is really difficult to have a gospel conversation with somebody who is hungry. It is really difficult to have a gospel conversation with somebody who does not know where they will spend the night, that night, because our flesh craves that security, our flesh craves to be filled and so one of the things they said was, "If you would help us financially minister to the physical needs, then we can address the most important need which is the spiritual need." And yet today we still live in a world where oftentimes the vision for ministry, the desire to share, is greater than the resources that we have at our hands.

The third inward obstacle is theological differences. You know one of my great jokes is probably not a great joke but I tell it greatly, is that when you get two Baptists, you're going to get three opinions. You know, one of the greatest difficulties that we have is there are so many different theological precepts and positions that at times our secondary issues somehow, someway get in the way of the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ. One of the best pieces of advice that I can give each and every one of us when it comes to inward obstacles of a theological difference is hold hands with people where you can hold hands with them, but separate hands when you must separate. In other words, on issues of great theological difference, one must not force themselves to agree with that which they do not agree with, but I think one of our struggles if we say, "Well, I don't agree with them on issue A, that does not discount that we cannot work together on issue B." And hopefully those theological differences inwardly would not so cloud the gospel that it is not proclaimed or preached.

So inwardly we've got hypocrisy, ministry needs, theological differences. Now let's talk about the outside. If you and I say, "Well, in spite of our issues, in spite of our struggles, in spite of our difficulties, we're going to go forward." What obstacles whether it's across the street or across the world did they face in the book of Acts and will you face in your life as well? Well, in the order of, shall we say, gravity, let's begin with verbal threats. In

the book of Acts we see a consistent picture of those who were contrary to the gospel threatening those that were preaching. In fact, in Acts 7, there's a great declaration, so much so that when Stephen is there testifying to the truth of Jesus Christ, it says that they shouted, they screamed, they mocked, they yelled at him, in fact, it says they gnashed on him with their teeth. There have been some that take that as a literal gnashing, others say, well, it's figurative. Well, if it is figurative, can we just agree they weren't being nice in whatever they said?

Verbal threatenings. How many times as you read through the book of Acts where the early believers were told, "If you preach Jesus one more time, this is what we're going to do." In fact, allow me to share with you that if we do not receive verbal opposition to our message, then we may not be preaching the gospel. The gospel is offensive to a lost, dying and dark world. One of the outward obstacles is when we preach the gospel, when we speak the gospel, usually people respond, at times, in a not very nice manner.

2. Physical beatings. Now it was mentioned about persecution earlier tonight. In the Western world we do not see this to the level that maybe we would in other parts of the world, but it is a natural response to the preaching of the gospel. You know, in Acts 5 there's this great story about Gamaliel. Remember this individual, this wise man who speaks about if it's for God, you can't stop it, if it's of man, it'll waste away, don't worry about it. You know, we usually look at that passage and we say, "Oh man, what a great story, man, that no matter what, if we just keep doing what God told us to do, it's all going to work out." Did you know that after he spoke those words of wisdom, do you know what the next verse says? Then they beat them and let them go to discourage them and maybe the physical beatings in your context would not involve the physical striking of flesh but sometimes it means a lack of access or a withholding of physical items that can we all agree make our life, oh, so much more pleasant to live in the flesh.

Then finally, there is the issue of martyrdom. In Acts 7 it was Stephen, in Acts 12 it was the Apostle James, by the time you get to the end of the book of Acts, everybody with the exception of the Apostle John had lost their life, the early believers, because they were not willing to change the message, they persevered in spite of the verbal threats, and even the Apostle Paul said, "I've been beaten more times than I can count and a couple of times I've been left for dead." Martyrdom. I would say in our context tonight, it's probably the last thing we would desire but actually the early church, they considered it a trophy. The early church considered dying for the faith a mark of faithfulness and fidelity. Oftentimes we spend great energy, time and resources avoiding the opposition from the world when in the early church they actually used it as a marker of faithfulness and fidelity.

Now don't get me wrong, none of these obstacles both inwardly or outwardly sound appealing to my flesh but as I've been taught by one mentor in my life years ago, that if you wake up every day and you don't run face-to-face into the devil, you might be walking the same direction that he is. If you and I in the spirit of the book of Acts are faithful to the story of Jesus Christ wherever we find ourselves, there is always going to be those who discredit the message based on what they observe of other believers, there

will naturally be those who verbally and physically oppose the message, but you and I are believers in Jesus Christ tonight because they didn't give in, they didn't give up, and they didn't give out. They were willing to persevere in the midst and one thing we discover that the more intense the opposition, the greater the effectiveness of the witness.