

Melva's Corner

CAN I GET A WITNESS?

July 18, 2005

Bible Text: Luke 24:44-49

Central Truth: The church exist for the sake of bearing witness to Christ.

What we call “the great commission” is found in all the Synoptic Gospels. It is the emphatic call from Jesus to the surviving eleven apostles and to the church that would be created by their preaching – that the gospel is to be preached among all nations for the salvation of all who will receive it. The least-well-known version of that commission is the one found in the Gospel of Luke.

[Jesus] said to them, "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms."

Then He opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, "This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high" (Luke 24:44-49; Matt. 28:19-20; Mark 16:15-16).

We have called these words “the marching orders for the church” or “the command that justifies the church’s existence.” For all the legitimate passion we seek to arouse in one another for prayer, Bible study, and spiritual formation, the gospel ultimately will not allow us to be self-focused; we pray, learn, and mature for the sake of modeling and sharing the gospel. For all the encouragement we give one another to feed the hungry, love the downtrodden, and rescue people in bondage to various addictions, those are not the ultimate needs of human beings; some people aren’t hungry and not everybody is enslaved to alcohol or drugs, but everybody needs a Savior.

The church exist for the sake of bearing witness to Christ. Consistent with Jesus' charge in the great commission, **we are determined to get over ourselves in order** to share the good news of the gospel with people whose lives are in chaos without a Savior.

Luke has Jesus saying that "repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem." Let's begin with the part of the message that focuses on "forgiveness of sins." I have an idea that freedom from the guilt and condemnation of sin appeals to everybody who has ever faced up to his or her failings, weaknesses, and wrongdoing. Is there anyone who believes God created us to live in rebellion against Him and against our own best interests? Is there anyone who wants to live under the oppressive cloud of guilt and shame that we bring on ourselves by sin?

The other part of the great-commission message in Luke's Gospel is "repentance." Repentance is the total life-response hearers make to the gospel, if they are saved by it. You know that the word itself means a change of mind, a turning around of one's life. It is the deliberate choice to change the direction of one's life from the longing for and pursuit of sin to the pursuit of Jesus Christ. I actually think repentance is simply a thread in the all-embracing response to him that Scripture calls faith. **Repentance is believing that God's description of our condition as sinful people is correct, that His way of addressing our problem through Christ has been effective, and that He is both willing and able to do in your life what you have seen Him do in the lives of others.** In the words of the song: "I have decided to follow Jesus, no turning back, no turning back."

If all we talk about and emphasize is God's eagerness to forgive, we could end up with a sloppy form of grace that distorts the gospel into easy-believism and church-joining as an alternative to discipleship. If we decide to focus on the multiple demands of repentance, however, we will almost certainly wind up with legalism – the view that salvation comes through strict obedience to a demanding law. As in Jesus' original statement, **the two must be preached together and in balance.** People must be challenged to change their minds about the meaning of life, make a determined decision to put Jesus first from this point forward, and nevertheless recognize that our salvation comes not from that

decision and its implementation – for nobody among us can be sinless under law – but through God’s continual supply of pardon, grace and empowerment.

Jesus seems to offer a basic approach to sharing the gospel in our text today that works well. First, let everything focus on the person and work of Jesus. Just as Jesus “opened the minds” of His original disciples to show that everything in Scripture points to Him, so must we both understand and teach the Bible with a Christ centric emphasis. That He suffered and rose from the dead is the ultimate proof of God’s love for lost humanity. Second, the offer of repentance and forgiveness of sins is for everyone – all nations, all races, all ethnic groups, all economic levels. All who will accept the judgment of God against sin that was accomplished in Christ’s death may have His pardon, blessing, and transforming power to see them through on the new path they have chosen. Third, the best way for those who are already Christians to draw people to this message is by being “witnesses” to Christ. The apostles could bear witness (first-hand testimony) to their personal experience of Jesus as alive from the dead. You and I do not have their experiences to share first-hand, but we do have our own testimonies of what God has done through Christ to redeem us, to make life meaningful, to give us hope for the life to come.

The final element of Jesus’ great commission in Luke is the promise of the Holy Spirit. And it is the Holy Spirit rather than any formula or methodology of presentation that makes the gospel effective. He encourages believers to live out our faith in practical ways. He touches others by His mystical presence in individual believers and in the collective body known as the church. He convicts hearts of their need for God. And that becomes the opening for you to bear gentle witness to what He has done for you, to share your convictions about Jesus, and to invite that person to come and experience His for them self! God will be faithful in bringing that process to its conclusion. That is his responsibility and promise of the Holy Spirit.

I’m reminded of an event where the town’s police chief was cruising the streets. At an intersection, he saw a driver who appeared to be confused. Thinking the man was lost and trying to find an address, he pulled over to help him. As it turned out, the man was looking for something. He told the Chief he was looking for a police officer to arrest him because he was drunk! Sure

enough, the 28-year-old man was feeling no pain. He produced a non-driver's I.D. because his driver's license had already been suspended. A preliminary breath test indicated his blood had more than four times the legal 0.08 alcohol content in his system.

People aren't always that straightforward or self-aware when they are drunk – or angry or depressed or frightened. Sometimes we have to pick up the signals of someone's bizarre behavior and take the risk of trying to help him. Did you catch the euphemism for intoxication I used earlier? I said the drunken driver "was feeling no pain." To the contrary, his action of asking to be arrested tells me he was feeling considerable pain – and knew he was in danger of hurting others because of his condition.

I know people whose temper and rudeness, abuse of a mate, adultery, alcoholism and general bad attitude toward life are symptoms rather than primary issues. They feel guilt, shame, and rejection to the very depth of their souls. They are frustrated far less with others than with themselves. They want a sense of forgiveness and direction for their lives, but they have no idea where to look for it. **The gospel says that God is eager to communicate His love and pardon and forgiveness to all of us – no matter what our past or the intensity of the pain it has brought. But someone must be cruising the streets, someone must be on their post, able to spot those confused people, and willing to risk involvement with them.** Then God can begin His work of rescue and redemption. You can witness to what He has done for you. You can point individuals to the Christ-story. You can model a life of repentance, testify to the joy of pardon and become God's instrument for leading that soul to the fountain of life that has been opened in Christ.

That is at the heart of our reason for existence, church! And if you are someone who is fellowshiping with us today through this message and being called to change your mind and life-direction for Christ's sake, we encourage you not to resist the nudge God is giving you. He is calling you to turn your eyes upon Jesus. To decide to follow Him. To announce your faith, to receive the gift of baptism in His name, and to start life over again as a child in God's own family. No turning back. No turning back. Yes, you can start life over again. No turning back. No turning back.



My Prayer

*Dear Lord Jesus,
I do believe that you died on the
cross to pay the penalty for my sin.
I do want to make a U-turn from going my own way
and I want my life to revolve around you.
Please come into my life, forgive my sin, and
make me a member of God's heavenly family.
Thank you for your gift of eternal life and for
your Holy Spirit who has now come to live in me.
In Jesus' name I pray,
Amen*

Memory Text:

"This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high" (Luke 24:44-49)