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Declare the Gospel

By David Dunlap

For some time now, many Bible-believing Christians, when speaking about evangelism, use the term “sharing the gospel.” Read any book or listen to any talk on personal evangelism, and you’ll likely encounter the phrase. Whether evangelicals or fundamentalists, Reformed or Arminian, Bible-believing Christians across almost all theological spectrums and denominational lines conceive of evangelism in terms of sharing the gospel. On one hand, the terminology is positive, it conveys the gracious act of giving others a treasure we possess. However, if by “sharing” we imply a kind of service where we only give the gospel to willing recipients, then our Christian terminology has become a problem. One might counter isn’t the greater problem that people are not sharing the gospel at all? Some might wonder what could be wrong with Christians “sharing” the gospel as long as the gospel is preached. So allow us to pose the question: what is the problem with “sharing” the gospel?

What Is Evangelism?

We might begin with what the New Testament says about evangelism. Our English word for “evangelism” derives from the Greek word *euangelizo*.¹ It means, most basically, to announce good news. But there is more, this Greek word involves the authoritative declaration of the gospel. In other words, evangelism is an act whereby one speaks powerfully to the heart. You can’t hem and haw and do evangelism. To evangelize is to preach the good news. After inviting a friend to church, you don’t get to check the box for doing evangelism. Being faithfully present in your neighborhood doesn’t equal biblical evangelism. Having polite spiritual conversations at work or around the dinner table also doesn’t mean you’ve evangelized anyone. You must “announce” good news. But beyond the biblical definition, it’s also helpful to consider how Scripture describes the act of evangelism. Scripture lays stress on preaching the gospel, declaring and proclaiming a message. Is this just semantics? Is this merely an argument over words?

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No, this is not an argument over words but rather touches upon the need and urgency to reach souls for Christ. Let us explore this further.

Evangelism in the Book of Acts

When we look at the apostles, for instance, we see the ways in which they communicated the gospel. They bore witness to Christ and exhorted their hearers to be saved (Acts 2:40). Filled with the Spirit, they spoke boldly before rulers and authorities, proclaiming the resurrection (Acts 4:2). When threatened and told to keep silent, they prayed for greater boldness (Acts 4:29). After facing imprisonment, they continued to teach publicly. Throughout Luke's retelling of early church expansion, the gospel advanced as the apostles and others reasoned from Scripture, persuaded others, and testified to Christ. We hear how they preached good news and called sinners to repentance. What we don't find them doing is "sharing the gospel."

If you search the New Testament for this phrase, you'll probably discover one reference in Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians. There he writes, "Being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves" (1 Thess. 2:8). So "sharing" the gospel is clearly not unbiblical. But even in that context, it's instructive to see how Paul filled out what he meant by this "sharing" or "giving" of the gospel. He repeatedly emphasized that he spoke with boldness, making an impassioned appeal to them as he proclaimed the gospel (1 Thess. 2:2-9).

In short, the breadth of the New Testament clearly portrays Christian evangelism as verbal proclamation and challenge. It's news delivered as a persuasive plea, declaring the glory of Christ and calling sinners to repent. This is what it means to do biblical evangelism.

Sharing the Gospel Is Not Declaring the Gospel

With this in mind, we should re-think the term "sharing the gospel" that is so prevalent in Evangelical circles. Because words mean something, the words we use to describe evangelism help us understand our task and how to go about accomplishing it.

The problems with merely "sharing the gospel" are multiple. For one, sharing tends to be passive. "Sharing" conveys the idea of giving only to those who are interested. Children share "Legos" with other children who want them. The reality is, few people ever beg us to share the gospel with them. We will never reach a lost world by bringing the gospel to those who are willing to receive it. Sharing is clearly not the same as declaring. Not only that, but limiting our description of evangelism to this one phrase shrinks our definition of what evangelism can and should be. As a single word, "sharing" doesn't have shoulders broad enough to carry all that the Bible communicates about evangelism. Where are the Christians who will declare the gospel to this generation in power and grace? The one who

merely “shares” the message of the gospel will find that the message lacks depth, clarity, precision, and nuance. And, if I’m brutally honest, it’s just lazy language that we wouldn’t settle for in other spheres of life.

A Practical Illustration

I like to think of baseball as a prime example. What if a baseball coach consistently described the role of his pitchers in terms of *tossing* the ball? In either practice or a game, whenever his pitchers were struggling to get batters out, what if the coach’s instruction was simply to *toss* the ball? Not throw strikes. Not work the corners. Not change speeds. Not pound it inside. Just toss the ball. Would his pitchers have an accurate understanding of their responsibility? Would they know how to succeed?

Three Principles in Declaring the Gospel

1. Be Willing to Offend Your Hearers.

Firstly, if you effectively proclaim the gospel, it will be offensive to your hearers—there is no way around it. There will be inevitable conflict. You must come to the point of being willing to offend, or else you’ll never say much of anything. Paul was willing to be imprisoned for the truth of the gospel. Jesus spoke many difficult sayings that provoked offense.

2. Be Willing to Call For a Response.

Secondly, as we engage in declaring the gospel, we will see the need to invite our hearers to repent and believe the gospel. At times we will argue for the deity of Christ. We will defend the truthfulness of the Scriptures. We will also speak boldly about the cross and the resurrection of Christ. Yet there is also the need of closing the argument with the urgency of repentance toward God and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

As we call for a response to the gospel, we must not neglect to look for marks of divine conviction of sin. There has been a great deal of spiritual harm done by urging a profession of salvation without a real work of God in the soul. The trusted Bible teacher Harry A. Ironside (1876-1951) provides wise counsel when he writes:

“Let me give a word to those who seek to win souls: Do not try to rush people into confessing Christ; do not try to make them say they are saved. Endeavor to find out if there is any real exercise about their sins, if the Spirit of God has awakened them. The reason a great many people make a profession of Christianity and appear to come out for Christ in revival meetings, then soon afterward drift back to their former ways, is that there is no real work of God in their soul. They have never known divine conviction of sin. The first consideration is that men might be awakened to see their need of Christ. Then give the gospel to them. That is the divine order.” 2

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H A. Ironside
(1876-1951)



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3. Delight in the Gospel.

Thirdly, our lives should display a love for Christ and a love for His finished work on the cross of Calvary. Our message should captivate us and demonstrate a love for the truth. It should not be a message delivered in a cold, dry, and compassionless fashion. Our message should display a love for others. The apostle Peter writes about the gospel, describing it as our "...like precious faith"(2 Peter 1:1). The gospel is "precious" —it is costly, beautiful, valuable, and important. Peter delighted in the gospel.

Conclusion

Preaching the gospel requires proclaiming unchanging fundamental truths. Believing the gospel requires yielding to these historical and biblical facts. When we preach, others should see how the gospel has changed our lives. There should be joy in our lives and power in our message. Declaring the gospel isn't simply engaging in a religious discussion and exchanging ideas. It isn't enough to merely tell others what we believe. We need to declare what they need to do.

Of course, there is also an urgency in our message. Our message must be flooded by love and filled with grace. After the bride poured out her heart about her love for Solomon, the daughters of Jerusalem turn to the bride and ask, "Where has your beloved turned aside, that we may seek him with you?" (Song of Solomon 6:1). May others seek our Beloved Savior when we declare Him to them.

Endnotes

1. W. E. Vine, *Expository Dictionary of New Testament*, (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1980), p. 100
2. Harry A. Ironside, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, (New York, NY: Loizeaux, 1976), p. 106-107