

PART ONE

The Whole Gospel

Content of Our Message

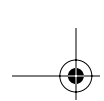
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Personal Witness as Planting and Watering

I waited expectantly as the speaker began his comments. His topic was evangelism. I was taken aback when he started using the phrase “soul winning” to describe his evangelistic practice. “Okay,” I thought to myself, “so this impersonal phrase grates you. Let’s see if the rest of the talk gets any better.” It didn’t. What followed was a string of success stories about people he had led to Christ. He reinforced his point by citing famous stars and athletes as victorious evangelists. Then came an emphasis on techniques and manipulation of people reminiscent of cults I had studied.

His crowning illustration of how to “get the gospel out to every person” was a detailed set of instructions on how to roll up a gospel tract in such a way that it could be accurately dropped from the window of a moving car. The object was for it to drift to the feet of a hitchhiker—as you passed him





by! He justified this technique on the basis of the startling story of a young man who was converted by this sort of “gospel bomb.” The speaker’s conclusion, “It works,” sounded to me like the unbiblical idea “the end justifies the means.” As I left the church that night I wondered, *Instead of sending his Son, why didn’t God just send a tract?*

Perhaps closer to your experience is the evangelistic approach of majoring on the conscious (felt) needs of people (loneliness, lack of love, hurt, stress, discouragement and so on) and molding Jesus into a supplier of their desires. Often the deep sinful nature of their selfishness is never addressed. Well-meaning Christians dilute the gospel into a bandage for surface wounds and medicine for selfish wishes. The deeper need of reconciliation with their Maker on his terms of unconditional surrender is omitted. Legitimate desires (to be loved, have health, not be lonely) can become idols.

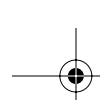
WHAT IS WITNESSING?

We have good cause to wonder what kind of a gospel is being conveyed in our day. I am referring not only to individual speakers (this man was a professor of evangelism at a Christian school) but to seminars and books that purport to train Christians in evangelism. I’m embarrassed at the shoddy methods and anemic view of God prevalent among evangelicals. We need a growing concern for a God-honoring witness to his grand gospel. Before we can make any headway, however, we should define our terms. What do we mean by *evangelism* and *witness*?

In thinking of *witnessing*, we have to walk between a narrow and a broad definition. Narrowly defined, *witnessing* is confined to a rehearsal of a few gospel facts in the hearing of a nonbeliever. Broadly defined, it is whatever we do as Christians before the watching world. Neither of these definitions is satisfactory. The first narrows witness to only our lips; the second broadens it to just being nice. Both our words *and* our ways are inextricably bound together in witness. It is easy to excuse ourselves by saying either “Well, I told her the gospel!” or “I just live my life before others.” These two extremes seem to have developed more in reaction to each other than on any biblical basis. What might be a more balanced view?

The main design for each man and woman is not “to be a super soul-



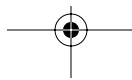


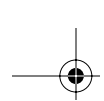
winner night and day.” As the Westminster Catechism says, it is “to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.” This means that we, as whole people, are to enjoy God, starting now, and keep his honor in focus in all that we do. Clearly the way we live is a primary aspect of our witness. Yet our life is to be coupled with telling God’s truth. People need to be told *who* makes our lives different. Our lives, then, will illuminate the truth we express to non-believers. The airplane of Christian witness has two wings: our lives (conduct) and our lips (conversation).

To remain silent and let others interpret our actions is wrong; God himself did not do this. The pivotal points of God’s redemptive action in history are accompanied with verbal revelation. God wants us to understand the meaning of his actions. Likewise, we must speak—and speak of Christ—even if we sense our own inconsistency of life. We must speak even when we do not know much about the Bible. We must speak even when it is inconvenient. God is bigger than our sins, our ignorance, our pride. He will honor his word in our mouths.

Nevertheless, at times our actions do speak louder than our words. When John describes our commission to witness, he says that as the Father sent the Son, so we are sent to others (Jn 20:21). God didn’t send a tract; he prepared a body. Likewise, God has prepared your life and personality to demonstrate him. We need to be creative and selfless in our love to others. We need to learn how to be friends as well as perceive the needs of others and *do* something for them. Much of Jesus’ witness was in response to a question following an act of kindness or a miracle. But we need to make sure that we are not condescending. We should allow others to help us, let them minister to us. Jesus asked the Samaritan woman to give him some water. We need to learn to be human and treat others as God’s image-bearers. If we are friendly only as long as someone is interested in discussing the gospel, we don’t know much about friendship. We need to listen and seek to serve, not just talk.

How does the Bible define *witnessing*? In the Great Commission as expressed by Luke, we have central truths to which we are witnesses (Lk 24:48). At the ascension, Christ’s last words command the disciples to witness about him, a person (Acts 1:8). In the Gospels we see the writers selecting incidents from the life of Christ to convey the gospel. The background





for the word *witness* is the law court. To witness is to testify that Christ is who he said he is. Such testimony is a means to an end—to give an eyewitness account of the truth (1 Jn 1:1-3).

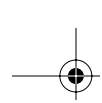
Studying in the Swiss Alps at L'Abri in the 1960s with Francis and Edith Schaeffer, my wife and I had little idea that God would use us to help someone find God's grace. A young man, Chris, arrived one afternoon when our community was working in the gardens and carpentry shop, cleaning and cooking. He was a student of religion at the University of Pennsylvania, touring Europe to learn about life. He eagerly joined in with those of us from every continent who had come to search for truth. He liked the intellectual stimulation, friendliness and high morals, and seemed confident in himself.

In this man's eyes, Jesus was intriguing but unnecessary to living the good life. One day I asked him to read Paul's account of why he had transferred his confidence from self-righteousness to a gift-righteousness. Pondering this question, Chris began to spend time alone, reading Scripture and asking God to make Christ real to him. Later that summer we parted with a promise to see each other back in Philadelphia.

At the same time that I was getting to know Chris, a young woman named Franny, whom I knew from Philadelphia, was also studying at L'Abri. Franny had been raised in a reputable New England family and had moved to Philadelphia two years previously. Following her religious upbringing was important to her, so she sought out a church with the refined atmosphere and high liturgy to which she was accustomed. It wasn't long before her cousin, who had become a Christian, contacted her and introduced her to his Christian friends. Providentially, one of them belonged to a group of students at Westminster Theological Seminary who had a burden for evangelism. Each Sunday these students would invite friends to church and then to the pastor's home that night for a discussion. Franny protested that if anyone was a Christian, she certainly was.

Slowly, however, realization of her unbelief began to dawn on her. In her own words, "I found myself confronted with my self-delusion at each church service as I said the Apostles' Creed. I got to a point where, after I began 'I believe in God the Father Almighty,' I became silent for the rest of the recitation. I admitted I didn't believe anything else in that creed. I had





come to realize that my supposed faith was nothing more than a cultural tradition—a warm nostalgia.”

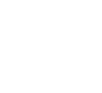
She began to search in earnest. Again in God’s providence, he brought a speaker and author to the city—and he was from her religious tradition! His name was J. I. Packer. Eagerly she attended his lectures on the epistle to the Ephesians. She was dumbfounded by the depth and richness of Scripture and by the fact that her own church (Episcopal) had once been united in teaching the importance of new birth. At the meetings she was introduced to a Baptist business executive who mailed her a copy of Bishop J. C. Ryle’s book on the confessional statement of her church (*The Thirty-Nine Articles*), which she began to read. Several weeks later, Franny called me. “Could you come to my apartment as soon as possible? This is all making sense. I believe! I want to talk to you.” This is the background that later led to her visit to L’Abri with two of her Christian girlfriends.

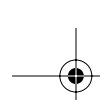
While at L’Abri, Franny caught Chris’s eye, and they agreed to see each other back in Philadelphia. Since I was serving the students at the University of Pennsylvania through InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, Chris joined the group and started going to church. He and Franny, both new Christians, began to date and soon were married. As the years have passed, our friendship has continued. In a unique twist to this story of evangelism, Chris joined the staff of InterVarsity Christian Fellowship and is now my supervisor! How I long for those reading this book to be used by God in bringing others to Christ. Aside from worshipping God, there is nothing else in this world that is more deeply fulfilling.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE GOSPEL AND OUR TESTIMONY

The content of our message is Christ and God, not our journey to faith. Our personal testimony may be included, but witnessing is more than reciting our spiritual autobiography. Specific truths about a specific person are the subject of our proclamation. A message has been committed to us—a word of reconciliation to the world (2 Cor 5:19).

Good evaluation questions to keep in mind after hearing a testimony are “How much did I learn about Christ? How much about the speaker? Which was more prominent?” When people are very much in love, you find them





expressing many things about their loved one and not always focusing on themselves. I still remember the change that came over an especially shy girl every time she got the chance to talk about her boyfriend. You couldn't keep her quiet! It is the same with a healthy testimony about our lover Christ. (See appendix A.II.)

Why is it important to distinguish between gospel truths and testimony? In an age of religious pluralism, we find many who are testifying. I'll never forget the time when I had been speaking to a young man about the change Christ had made in my life. His sincere response was, "Listening to New Age music does the same for me." What would you have said in reply? Some people recommend faith in a guru or in a technique of meditation or in self or in relationships. Many cite experiences of a change in life. If our witness has no truth content, we can expect the typical response: "That's interesting. I'm glad for you, but what you have isn't for me." Can you imagine the apostle Paul saying, "I just have this warm feeling in my heart"?

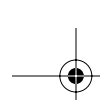
Faith is not to be looked on as a separate entity ("I wish I had your faith") but as an ability given by God that is valid only because it connects us with Jesus Christ. "It is worth noting that the New Testament Christians never attempted to establish the truth of Christianity on their inward experiences. . . . To put it another way, never do we find Paul trying to prove the truth of Christianity to others 'because of the difference it has made in my life.'"¹

DISTINGUISHING OUR ROLE FROM GOD'S

The crucial thing to remember in evangelism is the distinction between our responsibility and God's. Our task is to faithfully present the gospel message by our lives and our lips.² Any definition of our task that includes results is confusing our responsibility with God's prerogative, which is regeneration. Picture a fragile, thin-stemmed wine glass. Now think of a rock the size of a basketball. Imagine lifting that rock and dropping it into that delicately constructed glass. Shattered. We too will be broken if we try to carry something that only God can carry. We plant and water; God gives the increase (1 Cor 3:5-9). We may reap—but only when God has brought the grain to maturity.

The question of whether or not we are evangelizing cannot be settled by counting the number of converts. In that case, many faithful mission-





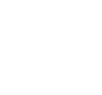
aries who have seen no converts from years of labor would have to be rebuked for lack of witnessing. To define *evangelism* in terms of results is too broad. Then its essence becomes a quantitative measurement: if there are no results, then no evangelism has been done. I do not mean to suggest we should not evaluate both our results and nonresults, building a holy dissatisfaction with nonresults. We are not content with never catching any fish when fishing (Lk 5:4-11) or having empty seats at God's kingdom banquet (Lk 14:15-24). Have you ever pleaded for lost people with deep sorrow as did Jesus and Paul? Have you wept?

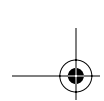
It is just as misleading to narrow our definition of *evangelism* to the type of meeting, literature, appeal or Bible passage used. If we did this, then we would be embarrassed to find little evangelism done in the New Testament times. Can you find a biblical example of the methods employed in today's typical evangelistic rally and appeal?³ Rather, we need to evaluate all supposed evangelism by the question "What truth was taught?" If we think wrongly about our definition of *evangelism*, we are likely to act wrongly in our methods of evangelism. (See appendix A.IX.)

In the Bible we have many examples of witnessing from which we can draw numerous principles. Studying the way Jesus interacted with people and the way the apostles witnessed in the Spirit can help in our own witness. From these models of witnessing, however, I will mention only one. The passage is an account of Paul's witness before Agrippa (Acts 26:16-29), and it highlights the characteristic of bold, conscience-directed speech.

Paul describes himself as appointed by God as a servant and a witness (a good combination to keep in mind). In a series of striking contrasts, the goal of his mission is summarized as nothing less than conversion. Repentance and evidence of it are his major concerns. Paul centers on fulfillment of Scripture and Christ's death and resurrection. He speaks to Agrippa's conscience—an element often neglected in witnessing. Genuine witnessing involves persuading people to convert but stops short of evaluating the success only in terms of results.

There are two main ways that we can study the presentation of the gospel. First, we can study the Bible itself, especially the book of Acts, the Epistles and the life of Christ. Second, we can study the history of the Christian





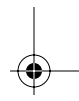
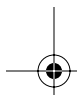
church. That is, we can look at the revivals and, in particular, the people whose preaching has been honored in the conversion of others. From such study, Martyn Lloyd-Jones has drawn the following foundational principles for evangelism:

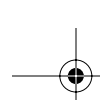
1. The supreme object of the work of evangelism is to glorify God, not to save souls.
2. The only power that can do this work is the Holy Spirit, not our own strength.
3. The one and only medium through which the Spirit works is the Scriptures; therefore, we “reason out of the Scriptures” like Paul did.
4. These preceding principles give us the true motivation for evangelism—a zeal for God and a love for others.
5. There is a constant danger of heresy through a false zeal and employment of unscriptural methods.⁴

Understanding that God, not us, is the evangelizer (the one who brings results) is wonderfully liberating. This makes witnessing an adventure in which we merely ride along with God as he moves out. We don't force open any doors, just walk through the ones he opens! In *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, C. S. Lewis allegorically describes the sensation of riding on Christ (symbolized as the lion Aslan) over the wall into the enemy's territory, as he confronts the power of sin to bring rebirth.

“And now,” said Aslan presently . . . “we have a long journey to go. *You must ride on me.*” . . . And with a great heave he rose underneath [the children] and then shot off, faster than any horse could go, down hill and into the thick of the forest.

That ride was perhaps the most wonderful thing that happened to them in Narnia. Have you ever had a gallop on a horse? Think of that; and then take away the heavy noise of the hoofs and the jingle of the bits and imagine instead the almost noiseless padding of the great paws. Then imagine instead of the black or grey or chestnut back of the horse the soft roughness of golden fur, and the mane flying back in the wind. And then imagine you are going about twice as fast as the fastest racehorse. But this is a mount that doesn't need to be guided and never grows tired. He rushes on and on. . . .





It was nearly midday when they found themselves looking down a steep hillside at a castle. . . . No face looked over the battlements and the gates were fast shut. And Aslan, not at all slacking his pace, rushed straight as a bullet towards it. . . .

Next moment the whole world seemed to turn upside down, and the children felt as if they had left their insides behind them; for the Lion had gathered himself together for a greater leap than any he had yet made and jumped—or you may call it flying rather than jumping—right over the castle wall.⁵

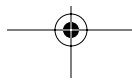
Here's a story of how I rode on God's back (and the prayers of a Christian family). It all began with a father who was concerned about a college student who wanted to date his daughter. Since the young man was not a believer, the father and daughter agreed that the only "date" would be on Sunday mornings at church. They told him to come talk to me about the Lord—and he did!

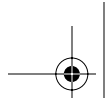
I was skeptical as a lanky Colombian with a ponytail settled on the sofa in my office. One hour and forty minutes later, I had become hopeful and encouraged by his interest in spiritual things and the Bible. He had already been attending a good church for three months; God's Spirit was definitely working. As I told him the story of the conversion of two "religious" men—Paul and the rich, moral young man—a light seemed to come on. He too considered himself religious and moral, but now he saw his pride, hypocrisy and guilt before a holy and loving God. I repeatedly warned him not to play with God in order to win favor with this Christian young woman.

Two weeks later Pablo came to tell me his story. When he left my office after the first visit, he went to a park for several hours and read his Bible, thought, prayed and reviewed the Scriptures we had gone over, and eventually repented of his sin. He said:

The next day I was changed. I felt joy, peace, forgiveness. Before, I only saw religion as mental acceptance of certain historical facts: Jesus lived in the Middle East; Jesus rose from the dead, etc. Now I feel the meaning of those facts.

That night my friends were drinking and had rented a porno video. As soon as I realized what it was, I couldn't stay in the house. I got up and left. Jesus would not want me to watch this. They were shocked and worried about me. I didn't know how to explain to them. But they know I'm into God now and





are suspicious, yet curious.

Later, I wrote a letter to a friend, who has a good job and money but is depressed and lonely, telling her what I had found: “Jesus is the Savior for our sins.” She thinks I’m just young and have a Christian girlfriend, and I’ll grow up someday.

Every day now I’m God-conscious. When I read the Bible, it’s like I’m listening; it seems to be speaking to me and taking me somewhere. I am much more aware of my sin now, but also of my sorrow for sinning before God (Psalm 51), and have experienced release from guilt. As I face temptations daily, I’m surprised at how I can now resist some of them. I feel strangely stronger. God has become more important than my career plans and the girl that I like. I could never meet all her needs and vice versa. Each of us needs God to be number one. It seems that God has even arranged our summer so that we will see very little of each other for 2 months. This is good. I have a lot of reading and evaluating to do.

I love to ask new babes in Christ, “What’s it like?” and just listen. Of course, I’m comparing it with Scripture—especially 1 John, which was written to give the marks of true salvation and assurance. I avoid telling them they are saved. The Holy Spirit gives assurances as they see the fruits of a changing life. How thankful I am for the prayers and wisdom of the Christian family who took Pablo to church and for a church that gives the gospel “straight.” *Wow!* Will you pray and speak to someone today? Invite them to church?

I have begun this examination of evangelism by describing the idea of witness. Now let’s shift to a scriptural study of what constitutes the “whole gospel.” We’ll do this both negatively (by way of contrast with a partial gospel) and positively (by way of presenting an outline and commentary on the central elements of the gospel).

