

“Evangelism – Obligation or Opportunity?”
(What went wrong with the harvest?)

Acts 1, 2; John 7

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Dr. Jerry Nelson

www.Soundliving.org

(evangelism)

About every six months I have a conversation with Bill Fay.

Bill, who served on our staff for a short time in the 80s, is now an evangelist and evangelism trainer.

Some of you also know Bill, and know something of God’s gracious transformation of his life.

You also know God has well suited and gifted Bill for the work he does.

Sometime back Bill called me and, as he usually does, he told story after story of God’s surprising work in people’s lives to bring them to faith.

On this one occasion he told of renting a car, outside of Washington D.C., as I recall it, and then promptly getting lost on his way to a speaking engagement.

Fortunately, no, providentially, the rental company had upgraded him to a car with the “OnStar” service.

Bill pushed the appropriate buttons, or whatever you do with “OnStar” and was connected to an operator ready to provide Bill whatever assistance he needed.

The short version of the story is that while she was giving him directions to his earthly destination, he was giving her instructions to avoid her eternal destination and get a new one.

Over the “OnStar” satellite voice connection, he led her to a profession of faith in Christ.

Bill lives his life looking for opportunities to bear witness to the saving power of his loving God to change life and destiny.

Every time I talk to Bill or even think of him I feel a twinge of guilt as I think, for example, of my most recent plane trip, where I ended up almost praying that I wouldn't have to sit next to anyone, much less having to have a meaningful conversation.

Contrary to Bill, it seems that my passion is to disengage, not engage.

I exaggerate, but I do so to ask, toward which end of that spectrum are you?

Do you look for every opportunity to witness to what Christ has done in your life or do you rarely, if ever, even think of it?

In this sixth and final sermon in the series entitled, "Gables, the Kingdom and 2005," I am obviously speaking about evangelism.

I can think of few subjects, other than money, which are more likely to make a church audience go deaf than evangelism.

You can't have been a Christian very long before you find out that God is a missionary God and his children are missionary people. Jesus said in John 20:21 "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you."

From my childhood I have heard that I am supposed to bear witness to who God is and what he has done.

Two summers ago, my father took from his wallet and handed me a very small card that he had had in that and previous wallets for nearly 50 years.

This is that card and on it is my name with the date and then the following words: "I accepted the Lord Jesus Christ as my personal Savior today and by his help will read a portion of the Bible and pray each day and with the strength he gives me will tell others about him."

Since my childhood I have read and heard repeatedly the commands of the Lord to bear witness to others of his person and his saving work on the cross.

Matthew 28:18-20

“Then Jesus... said... “go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them... and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you...”

Mark 16:15

“He said to them, “Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation.

Acts 1:8

“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

Acts 10:42

“He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead.

2 Corinthians 5:19-20

“And (God) has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us.”

I doubt there is a true Christian in the place who would disagree that every Christian has been called on to share the good news of Jesus with others.

When Jesus was physically here on earth, the Bible says that on one occasion, recorded in Matthew 9:35-37:

“Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few.”

We are nearly 2000 years out from that time and yet the condition of the crowds in our time is the same and also the problem of the workers is the same.

The title of an old book puts the question simply: “What’s gone wrong with the harvest?”

In light of the tragic lost-ness of people and the command of our Lord to be witnesses to a life-giving Savior, there are at least two other ways I could approach this message this morning than the way I intend.

I could use the tried and true method of making every sensitive conscience feel great guilt over not doing enough and then tell us all to get to work.

That is, I could spend time emphasizing the commands of the Bible and I could remind you of the truly tragic destiny of the unsaved.

But that usually has about as much impact as showing video clips of car accidents to young drivers.

The other thing I might do is give us all a lesson in how to share our faith with non-Christians and expect that we will all go out and do it.

I could tell you marvelous stories of the effectiveness of this particular method or that.

But conviction and inspiration don’t seem to last long.

- I have tried many, many forms of evangelism training and practice:
- I worked in two Billy Graham Crusades learned the “Steps to Peace with God” and practicing Operation Andrew.
- I learned and led Evangelism Explosion in three churches over a period of 30 years.
- I organized Lay Institutes for Evangelism with Campus Crusade for Christ.
- I led the church in the “Here’s Life America” campaign wherein we telephoned every home in the city in which I lived at the time.

- I've done beach evangelism, dorm evangelism, door-to-door evangelism, and street evangelism.
- I've used the Roman Road, The Four Spiritual Laws, the Bridge Illustration and a host of other tools.
- I've taken apologetics courses to be able to better answer objections.
- I've tried aggressive in-your-face evangelism, moderate life-style evangelism and passive "let my little light shine" evangelism.

With enough guilt and pressure, I found I could do any of them at least for a season but I couldn't sustain them.

I could learn the method and practice it but it was external not internal, it was forced not natural, and it was imposed not desired.

New converts often have zeal to tell what has happened in their lives and they have a desire for others to acknowledge the same thing.

Sometimes that zeal stems from arrogance, it's the desire for others to acknowledge what we've acknowledged, in order to validate our beliefs.

I contend that sometimes that zeal stems from desire to obey the Lord, but the confidence to do it comes from self rather than a true reliance on the Spirit.

It's the same confidence the Israelites had when they went up against little Ai and got soundly trounced.

I suggest that for many of us, if there ever was an initial enthusiasm for evangelism (regardless of it's motivation) it quickly dissipated.

There remains a gnawing guilt but also a powerlessness to overcome the spiritual inertia.

Every so often we hear a particularly stirring message on the importance of evangelism and our guilt compels us to take some action, but it too quickly wanes.

Jim Elliot, the missionary whose life and death God has used to stimulate thousands to become caring witnesses to God's love both here in America and around the world, wrote to his mother when he was still in college:

I spent this afternoon with Ron at (and he names the family). They were most hospitable and were eager to be remembered to you all, especially you, mother... They have a nice home and belongings and two cute kiddies, but are so like the rest of us that it is again disheartening. We are so utterly ordinary, so commonplace, while we profess to know a Power the Twentieth century does not reckon with. But we are 'harmless' and therefore unharmed. We are spiritual pacifists, non-militants, and conscientious objectors in the battle-to-the-death with principalities and powers in high places. Meekness must be had for contact with men, but brass, outspoken boldness is required to take part in the comradeship of the cross. We are 'sideliners' - coaching and criticizing the real wrestlers while content to sit by and leave the enemies of God unchallenged. The world cannot hate us, we are too much like its own. O that God would make us dangerous." (from Shadow of the Almighty pg 79)

Is it possible that I have so little love for Jesus and so little appreciation for who he is that I don't care that the rest of world ignores him?

Is it possible that my experience with God is so empty that I have nothing to tell anyone else about him?

Is it possible that telling about a football game, a recent vacation, or my kids is more interesting and impressive to me than telling about my God?

John Piper of Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis wrote, "The great sin of the of world is not that the human race has failed to **work** for God so as to increase his glory, but that we have failed to **delight** in God so as to reflect his glory. For God's glory is most reflected in us when we are most delighted in him."

My great fear is that we don't delight in Jesus.

Don't misunderstand me; I'm not suggesting we aren't grateful for what he has done for us.

But maybe we treat Jesus like a bystander who pulls us from drowning in a lake – we thank him and then move on.

We know God's commands us to be witnesses but we are preoccupied.

- We make decisions about purchases of homes, cars, and vacations with no consideration for the kingdom,
- We consume our energies and time pursuing personal goals and pleasures with no thought of how these resources could have been used for the kingdom of God.

How is it possible that we can live year after year in our neighborhoods and never pray for our neighbors?

How can we work year after year with colleagues on the job and never even think in terms of telling them about our God, nor even praying that one day they could be saved from the consequences of their sin?

Is it true what TIME magazine wrote of us several years ago:

"The evangelical tends to grow safe in his inner consolation, lapsing into passive acceptance of the evils of the outside world...preoccupied with serving self."

Some years ago I read an article by Dr. J.I. Packer in which he describes "acedia"

Acedia is an archaic English word meaning apathy or boredom.
Acedia is to be without passion.

We can go to church and speak of life and death and we can describe heaven and hell but we do it all with no more zeal than when describing the latest weather or latest store sale.

Acedia is a settling for the status quo with no sense of urgency or loss.

What will change us?

Is it just knowledge we lack?

Do we not understand what God has called us to?

Is it conviction we need?

If we only felt guiltier would we feel more inclined to act?

Do we need inspiration?

Will great stories of the impact others have had, make us desire the same?

I don't think our apathy toward being a witness is because of a lack of knowledge, or guilt or even inspiration.

I believe it is due to a coldness in our relationship with the Holy Spirit of God.

For several weeks I have anticipated preaching on this subject.

Over and over again I asked, "Why is it that many of us do we not witness to God's love and power to forgive and change lives?"

I finally concluded for some of us it is that we have no experience to which we can be a witness – we are not Christians; we have no real relationship with God.

For others of us, our hearts have grown cold and we have no real desire to bear witness; we know we ought to but we just don't.

For still others there is a desire but there is no power; we don't know what to do or say and when we do something it seems ineffective.

Those are exactly the conditions I find with the followers of Jesus in the New Testament until the Holy Spirit comes.

In all three of the above deficiencies, lifeless, desire-less or powerless, it is the Spirit of God who meets the need.

Watch what happens when there is an alive, aware and active relationship with the Holy Spirit:

After Jesus' resurrection he met with his disciples and he instructed them.

Luke 24:45-48

"Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. ⁴⁶ He told them, "This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, ⁴⁷ and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. ⁴⁸ **You are witnesses of these things.** ⁴⁹ 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."

Jesus said his followers would be witnesses to his person and work.
 But they were to wait!
 He said, don't leave the city until you have received what
 the Father promised.

When the same author, Luke, began his second treatise, the book of
 Acts, he repeated this instruction.
 This time he makes explicit what this gift from the Father is.

Acts 1:4-5, 8

"On one occasion, while (Jesus) was eating with them, he gave them
 this command: "Do not leave Jerusalem, but **wait for the gift** my
 Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. ⁵ For John
 baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the
 Holy Spirit.... You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on
 you; and **you will be my witnesses** in Jerusalem, and in all Judea
 and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

They would receive the Holy Spirit and when they did they would be
 Jesus' witnesses wherever they went.

Acts 2:1-4 "When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together
 in one place. ² Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind
 came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were
 sitting. ³ They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated
 and came to rest on each of them. ⁴ All of them were filled with the
 Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled
 them.

It seems quite evident that what Jesus promised in the gospels and
 again in Acts 1 is fulfilled at Pentecost in Acts 2.

While I don't have time to defend it, I want you to realize that two
 things are going on here at Pentecost.

The first is true of all believers at their conversion – they are
 baptized by the Holy Spirit into the family of God, more
 particularly into the person of Jesus – we are made one with
 Jesus.

That is the baptism of the Spirit and it occurs when we
 become Christians.

The second thing happening in Acts 2 was the filling of the Spirit.

Too often we focus on the speaking in tongues as the outcome of the filling of the Spirit, but the experience of tongues is incidental to the main outcome of the filling of the Spirit.

The main outcome was that they were witnesses to what they had experienced with Jesus.

And that cause and effect is repeated often in the books of Acts.

They were filled with the Spirit and spoke out as witnesses of Jesus.

In the following I exaggerate to make a point:

There were no sermons to prod them into action.

There were no testimonies of how others have done it, to equip them in evangelism.

They didn't run campaigns, courses or contests.

They had a relationship with the Spirit of the risen Christ and they simply told others about that Jesus.

Please don't misunderstand, I do want us to have testimonies that will inspire.

I want us to have courses that will equip.

I want us to learn more and more what the Bible says about reaching out to the lost for their sake and God's glory.

But I'm convinced there is a more fundamental need.

- It is the need for a Holy Spirit revival of true religion in our hearts.
- It is the need for the Spirit to revive a love for Jesus in us.
- It is the need for the Spirit to break our hearts with what broke the heart of Jesus.
- It is the need for the Spirit to revive our spirits – to bring life again to our cold hearts.

In John 7:37-39, it says, "On the last and greatest day of the Feast, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. ³⁸ Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him." ³⁹ By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive."

That's what I want! Do you?

I want "streams of living water to flow from within me."

By this Jesus meant the Spirit whom we would receive.

- I want to be in daily living relationship with the Spirit.
- I want the Holy Spirit of God to flow out through me in witness to the greatness and goodness of my God.
- I want to care, truly care about my God's glory and about people's tragic destiny without Jesus.
- And I want to live out that concern in some way; I may not be an evangelist but I am a witness.
- I want to be intentionally available and obedient to the Holy Spirit.

Jesus said, if anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink.

And I believe that such revival in our hearts begins with confession and desperation.

It begins with an acknowledgement of our uncaring hearts – a confession of our coldness toward God and others.

And it continues with pleading prayer to God that he would make us desperate for him.

Are you thirsty?

Do you want to love God?

Do you even want to want to?

In C.S. Lewis' Chronicles of Narnia novel The Silver Chair, Jill sees Aslan the lion and she runs into the wood in her fear.

She runs and runs until she is exhausted and feels as if she is dying of thirst.

She hears the gurgling of a brook and approaching it she again see Aslan, the lion.

Aslan, as even the youngest reader knows, is C.S. Lewis' representation of Jesus.

"Are you thirsty?" said the Lion.

"I'm dying of thirst," said Jill.

"Then drink," said the Lion.

"May I – could I – would you mind going away while I do?" said Jill.

The Lion answered this only by a look and a very low growl. And as Jill gazed at its motionless bulk, she realized that she might as well have asked a whole mountain to move aside for her convenience. The delicious rippling noise of the stream was driving her nearly frantic.

"Will you promise not to – do anything to me, if I do come?" said Jill.

"I make no promise," said the Lion.

Jill was so thirsty now that, without noticing it, she had come a step nearer.

"Do you eat girls?" she asked.

"I have swallowed up girls and boys, women and men, kings and emperors, cities and realms," said the Lion. It didn't say this as if it were boasting, nor as if it were sorry, nor as if it were angry. It just said it.

"I dare not come and drink," said Jill.

"Then you will die of thirst," said the Lion.

"Oh dear! said Jill, coming another step nearer. "I suppose I must go and look for another stream then."

"There is no other stream," said the Lion.

It never occurred to Jill to disbelieve the Lion – no one who had seen his stern face could do that – and her mind suddenly made itself up. It was the worst thing she had ever had to do, but she went forward to the stream, knelt down, and began scooping up water in her hand. It was the coldest, most refreshing water she had ever tasted.

When we are desperate, and when we realize that Jesus alone can meet our desperation - then we come.

But we come on his terms.

Are we desperate for such a relationship with the living Holy Spirit of God?

Have we tried long enough to pump water from an empty well?

Listen to the words of an one hundred year old song:

Spirit of God, descend upon my heart;
Wean it from earth, through all its pulses move;
Stoop to my weakness, mighty as Thou art,
And make me love Thee as I ought to love.

Hast Thou not bid us love Thee, God and King?
All, all Thine own – soul, heart and strength, and mind!
I see Thy cross – there teach my heart to cling;
O let me seek Thee, and O let me find!

Teach me to love Thee as Thine angels love;
One holy passion filling all my frame;
The baptism of the heav'n descended Dove –
My heart an altar, and Thy love the flame.