

TAKING MEN ALIVE

EVANGELISM ON THE FRONT LINES

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Then he said to his disciples,
“The harvest is plentiful but the
workers are few. Ask the Lord of
the harvest, therefore, to send out
workers into his harvest field.”

- Matthew 9:37-38

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DEDICATION:

For men and women who are in the uttermost part of the earth turning people from the power of Satan to God.

INTRODUCTORY NOTE:

All of the things in these chapters I have studied, meditated on, taught, and practiced for the last fifty years. Besides the Scriptures, I owe much of what you read to A. Paget Wilkes and his book *The Dynamic of Service*, a compilation of his teaching to missionaries gathered in Karuizawa, Japan, in 1920.

The title of this book has been taken from another book of the same title, published 1907. It was a book on evangelism by Charles G. Trumbull. It, in turn, was taken from a book by his father, Henry Clay Trumbull. Henry Clay Trumbull was a great personal evangelist in the last half of the nineteenth century. His book *Individual Work for Individuals* is a record of actual experiences, grouped by chronological periods in his life.

To “take alive” only occurs twice in the New Testament. “Then Jesus said to Simon, “Don’t be afraid; from now on you will fish for people” (Luke 5:10).

The other is also evangelistic, only it is to set free, men who have been *taken alive* by Satan: “Opponents must be gently instructed, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth, and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will” (II Timothy 2:25-26).

ACTS 26:18

Paul's testimony before Agrippa in Acts 26 gives key information about the principles of evangelism. Paul was appearing in trial before Festus after having been imprisoned by Felix for two years. When Paul came before Festus, he appealed to Caesar. Festus did not know what charges to write to Caesar concerning him, so he called on the king, Herod Agrippa, and the king's sister, Bernice. A few days later, the royal pair came with great pomp, and Paul was brought before them in chains.

The Apostle Paul had come a long way in his life up to that point. He had once been a great persecutor of the saints. Just before his conversion, the Lord spoke of him to Ananias, telling Ananias not to be afraid to go minister to him, saying, "This man is a chosen instrument to carry My name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel" (Acts 9:15). Here was Paul, fulfilling the Lord's statement, appearing before Gentiles and their kings, though in chains. Yet there could be no doubt that Paul was in charge of the

situation. He told the king and the governor how he had received his orders directly from Jesus Christ himself:

On one of these journeys I was going to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests. About noon, O King, as I was on the road, I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, blazing around me and my companions. We all fell to the ground, and I heard a voice saying to me in Aramaic, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute Me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.” Then I asked, “Who are you, Lord?” “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,” the Lord replied. “Now get up and stand on your feet. I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen of Me and what I will show you. I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles. *I am sending you to them to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in Me.*” (Acts 26:12-18, emphasis mine)

There is no greater authority than the Lord Jesus Christ. He gave the Great Commission to Paul personally. This was the greatest Teacher teaching the greatest student—Jesus telling Paul how to witness and to whom to witness. In this short speech before the king and the governor, Paul repeated the Great Commission to Herod in very significant detail.

“I am sending you to them to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in Me.”

These are the two goals of evangelism: forgiveness of sins and an everlasting inheritance (a “place among those who are sanctified”). We are to expect these results from evangelism.

The Lord Jesus told Paul that to achieve these results, he must do three things: 1) open their eyes, 2) turn them from darkness to light, and 3) turn them from the power of Satan to God. As soon as people are turned from the power of Satan to God, they receive forgiveness and an everlasting inheritance.

These things are not equivalent to one another. They are three distinct, progressive elements of evangelism.

Let me illustrate. Suppose you are in a dark room with your eyes closed, and you say that you cannot see. I turn the light on. Do you see now? No. Why not? Because your eyes are closed! Light does not cause sight.

Suppose you are in a dark room again, with your eyes still closed. You say you cannot see, so I tell you to open your eyes. You open them, but you still can't see. Why? Because there is no light! Open eyes do not cause sight, either.

What Christ said to Paul makes sense when we think in terms of natural sight, light, and darkness. When we have our eyes closed, we naturally want darkness. But if we are in a dark room with our eyes wide open, we long for light. Closed eyes want darkness. Open eyes want light. Open eyes are *hungry* for light.

What we need in order to see is both elements: *open eyes and light*. The order here is important: the open eyes must come first. If you give light to a person whose eyes are still closed, the eyes just shut tighter. But if you open their eyes first and then give the light, they see and are glad to see.

The light is the gospel. The gospel is what turns people from darkness. John Chapter 1 tells us that the light was in the world, and the darkness could not put it out. It cannot overcome the light. That is wonderful! In 2 Corinthians 4:3-6, Paul reminds us that:

Even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. The god of this age has *blinded the minds* of the unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made His light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.

The god of this world could not put out the light, but he can blind the minds of those who do not believe—and he has blinded them.

OPENING EYES

The first element of evangelism is opening a person's eyes, that is, his desires, his sense of need. This is not done with the gospel. Because the gospel is the light, it must come only *after* the eyes are open. For hundreds of years Christians have been preaching the gospel to a pagan world whose eyes are shut. The world cannot see the light, because light does not cause sight.

Have you ever told the gospel to someone in complete detail, and after you finished, the person you talked with did not have the faintest understanding of what you had so carefully and clearly explained? Why did he not understand? His eyes were closed. Have you ever been in a church where they taught the gospel for two solid years in confirmation class, and at the end of all those classes the children were confirmed and never came back again? The church is under the impression that if it shines light on kids for two years, they will see. But they do not see, because light does not open eyes.

Several decades ago, I spent two years running a bookstore for a Missouri Synod Lutheran college. During that time, I asked many students if all the wonderful truth they had learned in confirmation class had sounded like good news to them. Most of them said, "Are you kidding? Two years of classes on Saturday mornings? Does that sound like good news to you?" Most of these students were preparing for the ministry, yet the gospel *still* did not sound like good news to them! I found only one student in that college who said, "Oh, yes, it was wonderful. I couldn't get enough of confirmation class." Someone had opened her eyes so that when she got the light, it looked like light.

Since giving light to someone with closed eyes does not make them understand, when you are opening people's eyes, you do not have to explain the gospel to them. They will not understand it, no matter how clearly you present it. *Opening eyes is not about making sense.* It is pre-light, pre-gospel. Opening eyes speaks to the need, the desire, the fears, the hunger, the thirst. The unbeliever does not need to understand at this point; he just needs to be left wanting *whatever* it is that will meet his need.

The Bible also speaks of evangelism in terms of farming. The book of Jeremiah tells us to break up the fallow ground. Jeremiah was speaking of spiritual ground here. The first step is to plow the hard ground, harrow it, soften it. Consider the Lord's parable of the sower from Mark chapter 4: A man went forth to sow, and some seed fell on the pathway, some fell on the rocks, some fell in the weeds, and some fell on good ground. Jesus said if the seed falls on the hard path, the birds eat it. It never gets inside; the devil takes it away. If it falls in the rocks, it does not have enough moisture and

dies when the summer heat comes. If it falls in the weeds, the cares of the world choke it. But when it falls on good ground, it bears much fruit.

That is what would happen if you sowed that way. However, if Christ had been giving instruction on farming, He would not have said, "Go plant some seed on the turnpike." He would not say, "Go plant seed in the rocks." He would say, "Plow up the ground. Pick up the rocks, turn the soil over, get it ready for the seed." Opening eyes is like that. It is preparing the ground of a person's heart for the gospel. Plowed, soft hearts are hungry for seed just like open eyes are hungry for light. If we make someone hungry, when the seed of the gospel (which is the Word of God) is given, it is received. There may not be a conversion right away, but you will not run into an argument or an immediate rejection of the gospel. Then you can plant the seed and reap the harvest.

Suppose I have a thousand acres of unplowed ground that I want to be wheat. I say, "I need laborers in the field, so get out there!" and you run out, jump on a combine, and start driving it around the unplowed ground. I get you back and say, "No, no, wrong! Don't reap. Plow."

"What do you mean, 'Don't reap'? There were six stalks of wheat out there, and I got them all!"

You probably did. There are always people ready. However, when the ground is hard, we should plow. It is wonderful to watch the ground turn over. You know something? Hard ground does not object to being plowed. It only objects to being planted or reaped! Closed eyes do not object to being *opened*; they just object to being given light.

The best way to open a person's eyes is to live a godly life in front of him. He may not know what the cause of that godly life is, because that comes with his understanding of

the gospel. Do not tell him why you live the life you do; you can tell him that after his eyes are open. He might think, "Oh, Joe is such a wonderful man. He must be a Buddhist. I think I'll study Buddhism." That is not bad, because he is still looking at you. Opening a person's eyes does not mean that he comes to God; it means that sooner or later he will come to *you* or to someone like you. When you live a godly life in front of people, it reaches them emotionally, either positively or negatively. It makes a person very conscious of his state, or perhaps just very conscious of *your* state. He realizes that he is unhappy with his, and he admires yours.

Living a godly life means having a great love for him. This love is not necessarily expressed with a gospel tract attached. (Remember, you are still opening eyes.) Love the person for who he is. Love him unconditionally, regardless of where he is. *Loving him* is key.

Another way to open eyes is with the things you say, in a testimony. This testimony does not have to have the gospel in it, either. Years ago, I was working in a Christian bookstore in Ann Arbor, Michigan, and a student from the University of Michigan who had wandered in suddenly realized what kind of bookstore it was and felt obligated to tell me why she was not a Christian. She went through the entire history of Christianity—the Conquistadors, the Inquisition, the Crusades, the present inconsistency and hypocrisy of the Church, etc.

As she finished, I looked at her and said, "Well, that's funny. I don't agree with any of those things either, and I'm a Christian."

She looked at me, slightly puzzled. "How could that be?"

"I'll tell you why I'm a Christian." I said, "Twenty-three years ago I had an encounter with God that was like having a

bath on the inside. It's changed my life, and I've been happy ever since. I'm sorry you're not a Christian." I turned around and started to walk away.

This woman was in a belligerent mood when she started talking to me. If I had presented the gospel to her, she would have fought back. Instead, I told her something that made her want more: I told her I had been happy for twenty-three years! I told her I was clean on the inside, but I did not tell her how I had gotten that way.

As I started to walk away, she grabbed me by the arm and said, "Aren't you going to tell me how this happened?"

I opened her eyes with a simple statement. If I had tried to give her light, it would not have worked. Just to be sure her eyes were open, I said, "Well, we do not believe in holding onto the customers."

She said, "I have all the time in the world." We went into the office, and I gave my testimony, this time loaded with the gospel. I gave her a whole stack of InterVarsity booklets. I do not know for certain that she ever became a Christian, but I am confident that she did. However, I do know this: her heart got plowed, and she got planted in good ground. That is all that had to happen! To push for the harvest right then would have been foolish. She was not ready. We do not have to always do the *whole thing* at once when we are evangelizing. Sometimes the seed needs time to grow before you can have a harvest.

Some biblical examples of this approach can be found in the Gospel of John. Look at John 3:2-3:

He [Nicodemus] came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him." In reply Jesus declared, "I tell you

the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.”

That was the first time in the history of the world that the expression “born again” had been uttered.

Here is my question: Did Nicodemus know what Jesus was talking about? No! Did Jesus *know* that Nicodemus didn't know what He was talking about? Yes! Then why did He say it? Jesus was not communicating *information*. He was not communicating gospel. There was no light in His statement. Many people today think if you say “born again” often enough, you are preaching the gospel. There is *no gospel* in that statement. Jesus was not communicating light—He was communicating desire for the kingdom. He was opening Nicodemus' eyes. He kept laying it on, over and over. Finally, He rubbed it in: “You mean you are a teacher in Israel and you do not understand these things?”

Nicodemus was climbing the walls for light before it was over. Then Jesus gave it to him:

Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in Him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him. Whoever believes in Him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. (John 3:14-18)

Jesus set Nicodemus up. He opened his eyes, made him hungry, made him want more before He gave him the gospel.