

# STUDY THREE: THE BIBLICAL CONTENT OF WITNESS AND EVANGELISM

© Rosemary Bardsley 2005, 2014

In this study we ask the question: What is the biblical content of witness and evangelism? What was it that the disciples talked about as they went out into 'all the world' to 'preach the gospel'?

## A. THE TRUTH ABOUT JESUS CHRIST

The four men who wrote the four 'Gospels' are sometimes called 'the four evangelists' – because they wrote a 'gospel' - a 'euangelion' – a 'good news'. If we also want to be 'evangelists', people who tell the 'good news', we have to tell people what they told people –

They told the truth about who Jesus is  
They told the truth about what Jesus did

It's as simple as that. This is our witness, our 'testimony', what we have seen and heard: who Jesus is and what Jesus did.

**Green** comments on the way the apostles spoke of the person of Christ:

'It is the person of Jesus which attracts people; we must, therefore, keep the spotlight on him. Be Christ-centred ... if you want to follow the example of the earliest missionaries. Some aspects of what they considered important about Jesus might not come amiss.

'They told of Jesus as fulfilment. [Acts 2:16ff and chapter 7] ...

'They told of Jesus the man ... [Acts 2:22; 17:31] ...

'They told of Jesus crucified. ... [Acts 2:38; 20:38; 8:35] ...

'They told of Jesus risen ... [Acts 2:32] ...

'They told of Jesus reigning ... [Acts 2:34]

'They told of a contemporary Jesus ... [Acts 2:33]

[p 69 - 72]

**John Chapman** in *Know and Tell the Gospel* comments:

'The gospel is about God's Son. It is a truism to say that the gospel is about Jesus, but it must be said. We are so often side-tracked into thinking that the gospel is about man.

'The gospel neither has its origin in man nor does it have its content in man. The gospel is not about man and his needs, although these are not unimportant nor are they unrelated. The gospel is all about the Son. It is about Jesus. So when I am evangelizing someone I must be speaking about Jesus. If I am not speaking about Jesus, God's unique Son, then I am not preaching God's gospel. ...

'Why am I making so much of this? Just because people so often forget it. I work in a Department of Evangelism. Many organisations send us tracts and gospel teaching aids. These are designed to help people to evangelise their friends. I have been struck with the fact that so many of these neither begin with the Lord Jesus nor do they have as their main focus the Lord Jesus. It seems to me that often the unique person and the unique ministry of the Lord Jesus are not at the centre of much gospel preaching and writing today. Why is it that we rarely 'gospel' people with any of the four Gospels? Why is so much gospel preaching focused on man and his need? Could this be one of the reasons why so much evangelistic preaching today is so powerless to change lives? Because it is not God's gospel!? Because it is not the gospel which is "the power of God to salvation" [Romans 1:16]? When God the Father proclaims the gospel – His gospel – then He speaks about the Son and so must we.' [p18]

Chapman [p16 – 23] describes the Biblical gospel under these headings:

The gospel is God's  
The gospel is not new  
The gospel is ALL about Jesus  
The gospel is about a Man/King

The gospel is historical  
The gospel is about the powerful Son of God  
The gospel – Jesus Christ is Lord

### **Quote from Rebecca Pippert:**

'We must not be so anxious to get our friends into the kingdom that we fail to present a clear and honest picture of Christianity. Unless seekers have as clear as possible an understanding of the gospel, both its costs and privileges, before they commit themselves to God, our harvest will be poor indeed. We must seek to communicate that salvation is tied to a relationship to the living Christ as Lord as well as Saviour; it is tied to objective truth that demands a total response. Warm feelings and shivers are not enough; they are not even required.' [p 46]

## **B. THE WHOLE OF SCRIPTURE**

Paul teaches in 2 Timothy 3:16-17 that the 'holy Scriptures are able to make you wise to salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.' At the time only the Old Testament Scriptures were written. This tells us then that the Old Testament teaches us about Jesus Christ. This is affirmed by Jesus himself. In John 5:39 and 40 he rebuked the Jews for not recognizing him:

'You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life.'

And again in 5:45b-47:

'Your accuser is Moses, on whom your hopes are set. If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me. But since you do not believe what he wrote, how are you going to believe what I say?'

Again confirming that the whole of the Old Testament spoke about him, the resurrected Jesus on two occasions taught his disciples from all the Scriptures the truth about himself:

'Beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.'  
(Luke 24:27)

'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.' (Luke 24:44,45).

In addition to this the writer to the Hebrews spends his first ten chapters teaching us about Jesus Christ from the Old Testament. He teaches with great force and conviction that Old Testament characters, Old Testament historical events, Old Testament ritual and ceremony, sacrifice and priesthood, were foreshadowings, symbols, prophetic anticipations, of Jesus Christ, and of what Jesus Christ did.

The Biblical content of witnessing then, is Jesus Christ. From start to finish, in symbol and reality, in prophecy and in actualization, the Bible tells us about who Jesus Christ is and what he has done. It is the facts about Jesus Christ and what he has done that the Bible wants me to believe and to communicate to others.

### **Comments from Michael Green on Acts:**

'Wherever they went these early Christians spread the word [8:4]. For eighteen months at Corinth Paul was gripped by the word [18:5]. It was the same at Ephesus [19:10]. So much so that when Luke means us to understand that the church expands he tells us that the word grows. So it was in Judea [6:7], Samaria [8:14], in the first missionary journey [13:14] and in the campaigns in Asia [19:20]. No wonder the Twelve made it their priority [6:4]. No wonder they commended their converts to it [20:32].

'Does someone believe? It is because the word leads to faith [8:4ff]. ... Does someone become a Christian? It is the word he receives [17:11]. Is someone a counterfeit Christian? It is because he has no part in the word [8:21].

'It really would be hard to exaggerate the importance they placed on 'the word'. It means, of course, their proclamation of Jesus on the basis of the Old Testament. And so they claim that their message is not merely the word of men but the word of God which changes lives [1 Thess 2:13]. The word of God is the prime agency in the spread of the good news.' [p64]

## **C. IS 'PERSONAL TESTIMONY' WITENSSING?**

That depends.

Personal testimony supposedly relates what the Lord has done for me in the past or is doing for me in the present. Interestingly the New Testament witnesses rarely use this form of personal testimony. From a careful reading of the New Testament we can observe the following:

[1] 'Testimony' and 'witness' translate the same Greek word.

[2] The witness of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, the four Gospel writers, shows no interest in relating their own individual, personal experiences of 'what the Lord did for me', but only in relating the truth about who Jesus is and what Jesus did.

[3] The only reported 'testimonies' of Peter are his accounts of his Cornelius experience (Acts 11:4-17) and of his rescue from prison (Acts 12:1-17); on both occasions he was speaking to believers.

[4] On several occasions in Acts Paul spoke about his experiences. A number of these were to believers - Acts 15:12; 20:17ff; and 21:19. A number were to unbelievers - Acts 22:2-21; 24:10-21; 26:2-27 and 28:17-20. An examination of these testimonies shows them to bear more resemblance to modern mission reports and a defence of the faith than to modern testimonies.

[5] In Paul's letters we find two forms of personal testimony: firstly, as affirmation of the power and love of God, used to encourage the believers to stand firm in the faith (as in the Corinthian letters), and secondly, in his fight to maintain the truth and purity of the Gospel as it stood under threat of legalism (Galatians 1:13-2:21; Philipians 3:4-15). Both forms are written to believers.

All of this should make us somewhat cautious about the validity of personal testimonies as a form of witnessing to unbelievers.

Some of the dangers inherent in personal testimonies are:

[1] Personal testimony is, in itself, subjective. That is, it is *my* interpretation, *my* perception of what has occurred. Another person might have a similar experience and put an entirely different meaning on it.

[2] Personal testimony is, in itself, ambiguous. That is, it is capable of more than one interpretation. That an experience has happened cannot be denied or questioned. What that experience was, and, particularly, if and how God was active in that experience, is neither immediately nor always identifiable.

[3] Personal testimony, whatever the intentions of the person testifying, tends to glorify the witness rather than glorifying God. In fact some modern testimonies glorify the depth of sin out of which the person has been converted, rather than focusing our attention of the greatness and love of the Lord who did the rescuing.

[4] Personal experiences are often told as if they are self-validating and self-authenticating. The fact that '*this has happened to me*' automatically makes my interpretation of it right; or, *my sincerity* in this experience authenticates it. Neither of such suppositions is valid.

What precautions should we take to make sure our use of personal testimony neither undercuts the Gospel nor confuses our hearers?

[1] We should remember that the Biblical concern in witnessing is the glory of God.

[2] We should remember that the Biblical content in witnessing is the truth about who Jesus Christ is and what Jesus Christ did when he was here in human flesh.

[3] We should remember that it is this truth that saves people, not our personal history.

[4] If we relate our personal testimony and experiences we should do so in such a way that Jesus Christ is the centre of attention, not us. We should make it our aim to glorify him, never ourselves or our sin or our circumstances.

[5] Our personal testimony should always be secondary to and dependent on the written Word of God, not the other way around. His Word validates or invalidates my testimony, rather than my testimony validating his Word. His Word does not need my personal experience to confirm it. My interpretation of my experience, on the other hand, is subject to the written Word, and if found to be in conflict with that Word, must be discarded.

[6] Personal testimony can introduce and supplement the written Word of God but should never be substituted for it.

**Quote from Michael Green:**

'*Marturia*, 'witness', is one of the great New Testament concepts. ... it does not mean washing my spiritual linen in public, but telling people in my own words about Jesus and his resurrection. The emphasis is all on him, and the additive is my own humble assertion [based on having tasted and seen that the Lord is real] that Jesus is living and available and life-changing. In the New Testament this is always the prime sense of the word 'witness'. *Marturia* meant telling of Jesus ...'  
[p58]

**Quote from John Chapman:**

In the process of describing the gospel under the dot points listed in B.1 above, Chapman states:

'Any other experience I may have of Jesus is not to be put forward to men and women as the gospel. My 'experience' of Jesus can and must only be understood in terms of God's revelation of Him in the Scriptures. The gospel is anchored in history. It is almost impossible to ask people to commit their lives to Jesus as Lord if they know nothing about this Jesus from the Gospels.'  
[p20]