

STUDY FOUR: BIBLICAL COMPASSION IN WITNESSING AND BIBLICAL COMMANDS TO WITNESS

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A. WHAT'S WRONG WITH WITNESSING FROM A SENSE OF DUTY?

Read and discuss these statements from Pippert:

'To evangelize, it seemed, required insensitivity and an inclination to blurt out a memorized gospel outline, without inhaling, to every stranger you met. It never occurred to me that my pre-Christian, unredeemed, almost common-sense understanding about how to relate warmly to people might be valid. For instance, I knew how offended I had been as an agnostic when someone tried to push religion on me, without even bothering to discover who I was or what I believed. That was a proper response, I see now, for I should be offended when I'm being treated as someone's evangelistic project instead of as a person.

'Yet when I became a Christian I thought I was supposed to toss in my common-sense perceptions in order to be spiritual. I thought I was called to "offend for Jesus' sake!" The way I thought I was supposed to evangelize went against my very grain. ...

'... I also knew that unless I really cared for my friends, they would never be interested in the gospel. I was deeply moved by the way Jesus demonstrated compassion to the people he met. I wanted to do the same, although it didn't occur to me that this had much to do with evangelism. So I tried to reach out and care for the people God had placed around me. But I felt guilty for not outlining the gospel to every nonbeliever I met.'

[p11,12]

'I remember being with a Christian student on a beach during an evangelism training week. Bob and I met several religious sceptics and began talking about all sorts of things. Eventually the conversation got around to Christianity, and it was a lively and invigorating discussion. We even exchanged addresses before leaving. I was feeling very good about the conversation, but Bob seemed very quiet.

When I asked him what was wrong he said, "I thought it was an absolute failure. There are four major points to the gospel and you only brought in two of them, and they weren't even in the right order!"

I said, "What were the names of the three people we met this afternoon?"

"Oh, I don't know," he said. "Whatever difference does that make? There were two women and a man, or was it the other way around?"

I stared at him in disbelief and sadness. Here was a young man who genuinely loved God. He was exceedingly religious and sincere. I doubt whether he ever missed his daily quiet times. And yet he had missed the entire point. He was sure his agenda, his four points, were the supreme value. Yet his method was so rigid that real live human beings could not penetrate it. ... This student was so busy rehearsing his four points of salvation that he forgot that he was speaking to the very people Christ had come to save.

We must never forget that to be a follower of Jesus is to be dominated by love. Does my life reflect only religious activity or does it bear the mark of profound love? When our lives are characterized by the love of Christ, we can begin to interest people in the gospel.'

[p60-61]

B. FIVE IMPORTANT FACTS TO CONSIDER

FACT ONE: Compulsion, fear, guilt and 'scalp hunting' all work against compassionate and meaningful encounters.

It is readily observable that each of these four motivations are behind much 'witnessing' that is carried out in and by evangelical churches.

Christians witness because of Christian peer group or church pressure.

Christians witness because they are afraid they will be considered unspiritual if they don't. Some are even afraid that they are not Christians if they don't.

Christians witness because they are made to feel guilty if they don't.

Christians witness because they have a personal goal of getting 'souls saved'. This reaches its worst expression in concentration on numbers converted.

All of these motivations are self-centred rather than Christ-centred. In each of them 'I' is at the centre: *I am witnessing because I want to be accepted in my group, because I want to be considered spiritual, because I feel guilty if I don't, because I want to save so many souls today.*

Where is the glory of God in all of this? Where is our acknowledgement that his glory is our primary concern and responsibility? And where is that deep personal compassion with which Jesus was moved when he encountered the 'lost'? In witnessing in this way we are so centred in ourselves that neither God's glory nor Christ's compassion can shine through. We are using our contact merely to satisfy our own perceived spiritual needs and boost our own spiritual egos. Let us remember: nobody likes to be used.

FACT TWO: The person, our contact, is a real person, with real feelings, in real circumstances, with real problems, needing real friendship.

Much witnessing is done in a vacuum, to nameless individuals, with unknown relationships and unknown circumstances. They are treated merely as targets at which we shoot our little darts of supposedly evangelistic statements, or as receptacles into which we off-load today's offering of religious challenges. Rarely do such words reach the hearts of the hearers. When they do it is purely because of the over-ruling grace of God rather than the rightness of our approach.

There are circumstances in which it is possible only to 'speak a word for Jesus' and then leave the contact in the hands of God. But, for the greater part, our lives are spent in relationship with people. Real people. And we must treat them as such, not just in the affairs of every day life and work, but in this area of witnessing as well. Each person in our lives is a person we are commanded by our Lord to love. Not to use. Not to abuse. But to love.

FACT THREE: Jesus had all the facts - we don't!

Because Jesus Christ was the Son of God he knew what was in every person's heart and life and background. (See John 2:24-25; John 4:17b,18). For this reason he was able to jump right into conversations with apparent strangers and speak directly to the heart of their spiritual problem.

In this we cannot follow his example. We need to take the time to get to know them, to understand where they are spiritually, to gain their confidence. As we build up a relationship with them over a period of time we will be able to communicate the truth about Jesus Christ in a way that relates naturally to them, and we will be able to emulate his compassion, having gained an understanding of their particular situation in life.

FACT FOUR: I am not the judge, nor the jury, nor the correctional institution - only the witness.

Often compassion in witnessing is inhibited by a judgemental attitude. The Christian witness takes on the role of Judge, bombarding the contact with a deluge of accusations and charges, and condemning him/her to hell and judgement. The New Testament warns us against such an approach (Matthew 7:1-5; Romans 10:5-7). If the content of our witness is the Biblical content - the truth about who Jesus Christ is - that in and by itself, in the hands of the Spirit of God, will bring conviction of sin and the awareness of judgement [John 16:7-11]. If, in response to that realisation, we present the second element of Biblical witness - the truth about what Jesus Christ did - that in turn will, again in God's time and place as his Spirit works, open the doors of salvation.

In our involvement in the act of witnessing we must never lose sight of the fact that we are merely the witness. Our role is to tell the truth: to communicate our knowledge of who Jesus is and what Jesus did. It is God's role to judge. It is the role of the Spirit to convict and regenerate and renew. To grasp hold of this truth about the role of the witness brings a whole new realm of freedom into the act of witnessing. The responsibility of the witness is simply to tell the truth about Jesus. That is something we can do with love. That is something we can do with joy.

FACT FIVE: There is no essential difference between me and the other person.

Often we lose sight of this fact. We very easily give the impression that we are on a different level, that we are in ourselves more acceptable to God now that we are Christians. We forget that it is *only in union with Jesus Christ* that we are forgiven and accepted, that it is *only in union with Jesus Christ* that we have any right to enter into God's presence. It is very easy to lose touch with the fact that our relationship with God is sheer grace: totally unmerited, totally undeserved, totally unearned.

When we are telling someone the truth about Jesus Christ we must constantly remind ourselves that there are only three differences between ourselves and that person. One is that because we know Jesus Christ we actually know the true God. The second is that because we believe in Jesus Christ we are relating to God through a mediator, Jesus Christ. He has borne our sin and its penalty. The third is that the Spirit of God is at work in us. The person to whom we are witnessing neither knows the true God, nor has a mediator in the presence of God. He/she stands alone in the presence of the God he does not know, and into whose presence he/she has no right of access, and whose just judgement still rests upon him/her. He/she is unacquainted with the Spirit of God.

None of these three differences makes us essentially different from our unbelieving contact.

We are still human beings.

We are still sinners.

Apart from Jesus Christ we are just as deserving of the wrath of God as the unbeliever.

Every difference is sheer grace. Every difference is essentially a difference made by Jesus Christ, not by or in us.

If we remember this, compassion, not superiority, will govern our witnessing relationships.

Discuss the implications of these five facts for the way we engage in personal evangelism and witness.

C. JESUS SHOWED COMPASSION

Although the Lord is the Judge of all the earth and his judgement is just, although if he acted toward us in strict justice none of us would survive, yet he relates to us with compassion even in the midst of judgement.

We read of this in Isaiah 40:1 where the Lord says to his people reeling under devastating judgement: 'Comfort, comfort my people'. In his compassion he recognizes our frailty and our transience - 'All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field' (Isaiah 40:6b). He relates to us with gentle tenderness and love - 'He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young' (Isaiah 40:11).

Into our poverty, our brokenness, our bondage and our darkness he comes in his Son with his message of good news: 'to bind up the broken hearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour ... to comfort all who mourn ...' (Isaiah 61:1b-2).

From the very depths of his being his love reaches out to us with overwhelming pity and kindness. (Matthew 9:35-38; 11:25-30; 18:23-35; John 8:3-11).

Of us who are his followers and his servants he expects this same compassion (Ephesians 4:32-5:2; Colossians 3:12-13). Rather than conveying to unbelievers an attitude of superiority and apartness, our appropriate feeling towards them is overflowing love:

'Oh, that my head were a spring of water and my eyes a fountain of tears! I would weep day and night for the slain of my people.' (Jeremiah 9:1).

Complete Section #1 in the Study Four Worksheet now.

John Chapman comments:

'Again and again we are reminded that God longs for men and women to turn back to Him in repentance. He tells us that He has no pleasure in the death of the wicked. He longs that they will return to a loving relationship of trust with Him [Ezekiel 33:11]. He grieves over men's hardness of heart [Luke 19:41-44]. He delays the final judgment so that people may repent [2 Peter 3:8,9].

'Matthew describes the attitude of Jesus in this way. "When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd ..."

'The true disciples of Jesus should be growing like his Lord. They should love the things Jesus loves and do the things Jesus did. ... Whenever we see Jesus in a given situation we know how we should behave in a similar situation. We know exactly how Jesus reacted when He saw the crowds, His heart welled up with compassion and that compassion resulted in action. ...'

'... God has declared his love for sinful humanity [John 3:16]. He longs that they will repent. Consequently we are not in the dark about how we should react to those outside of Christ. Most of us need a new work of the Holy Spirit within us to soften our hard hearts and cause us to grow more and more like Jesus in this respect.' [p61,63]

D. BIBLICAL COMMANDS TO WITNESS

Direct commands to 'witness' are few and far between in the Bible; in fact, a case could be made that there are no commands specifically to 'witness'.

Acts 1:8 is often taught as a command to witness, but it is really a statement of what was going to happen. Jesus tells his disciples that they *will* receive power when the Holy Spirit comes, and that they *will* be his witnesses. It is **not** a command.

John 15:27, which the GNB and KJV wrongly translate as future - 'will speak about me' and 'shall bear witness', is translated by the NIV as a definite command: 'you also must testify'. The Greek text is ambiguous: *martureite* translates simply 'you bear witness', which could be either a statement of the fact that the disciples do witness, or a command in which they are told to witness.

But although it is difficult to find a Biblical *command* to 'witness' it is obvious that Jesus Christ wants us, and commands us, to tell others about who he is and what he did. Matthew 28:20 exhorts us to 'go... make disciples ... teach'. Mark 16:15 says 'Go...preach the good news.' In John 20:21 Jesus said 'As the Father has sent me, I am sending you'. In Acts 10:42 Peter told Cornelius: '[Jesus] 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.'

It would be easy, as some do, to excuse ourselves from inclusion in these commands, reasoning that they were given only to the original disciples; but, if we were to do this we must of necessity exclude ourselves from every other command and promise which Jesus spoke specifically to the original disciples.

As we have seen in Chapter 2 the Biblical concern in witnessing is the glory of God. Peter puts it this way:

"But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, **that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.**" (1Peter 2:9)

Here we see that the very purpose for which God has made us his people is that we will declare his praise. Paul in Ephesians makes this same point three times where he states that our salvation is "to the praise of his glorious grace" (1:6), "for the praise of his glory" (1:12); and "to the praise of his glory" (1:14).

When we turn to the Old Testament we find that the word 'witness' is almost exclusively used in terms of **formal, legal observation or certification of an event or an agreement**, similar to our use of the word today of one who 'witnesses' our signature on a legal document. From time to time God reminds his people that they are such witnesses of his saving actions in their history; and on occasion he summons the elements of nature and the nations as such formal witnesses.

The formality of this concept of witness deserts us in the Psalms. 'Witness' occurs there only once, but we find through the Psalms an **exultant, joyful commitment to communicate the truth about the Lord, a spontaneous, exuberant encouragement to tell the whole world of his praise and his glory.**

Complete Section #2 in the Study Four Worksheet now.

If we look at these verses in their context we discover that this joyous communication of truth about the Lord is motivated by David's knowledge of his God and his knowledge of the salvation God has given him. He has been so impacted by the awesome, majestic otherness of his God that he wants to tell the whole world about him. In addition he is so impacted by God's forgiveness and salvation that his gratitude and joy are irrepressible. He must shout to the world who God is and what God has done for him. Not only this. He also knows that his God alone is God, one to whom is due praise and glory not only from him, but from all the nations. To this worldwide praise and glory of God he commits himself.

Let us note that David's concern is not primarily the salvation of the world but the honour and praise and glory of God. **God is worthy of praise. All people everywhere should be praising and glorifying God as God.** That is the motivating purpose of David's 'witnessing'. Yes. People from the nations will be saved: but this result is secondary both in purpose and time.