

WITNESS

After Jesus' resurrection from the dead and before His ascension into heaven, He gave this command to His disciples:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age. (Matthew 28:18-20)

This passage is called the "Great Commission," for with these words Christ commissioned His followers with the task of taking the gospel into all the world, baptizing, teaching and making disciples of those who would believe. The church has taken these instructions as its marching orders ever since.

Who is supposed to carry out the Great Commission?

The Great Commission was given by Jesus to His eleven disciples. But obviously Jesus did not intend for these eleven men to travel throughout the world and carry out His instructions on their own. No, this mandate was given to *all* followers of Jesus, from the first generation down to our own day. We are also His disciples, and the burden of evangelizing the lost rests upon us as well.

The word *evangelize* means "to tell the good news." The gospel is the good news of the coming of Christ, His death and resurrection and ascension, and the forgiveness and redemption and new life He offers to all who believe. God has not written the message of salvation in huge letters across the sky, nor has He assigned to angels the task of communicating it to a lost humanity. God has ordained that the message of salvation is to be spread by those who have experienced it.

Evangelism is not just something professional preachers do. All who have received salvation in Christ have the privilege and responsibility of sharing what they have received with others. We do not all do this in the same way; our abilities and opportunities differ. But whether to large crowds or to individuals, whether speaking, writing, singing or passing out tracts, all of us can find some way to share the good news.

When should we share the gospel with others?

The gospel is not just for Sundays. Today is the day of salvation (2 Corinthians 6:2). We should always be prepared to share the gospel with those around us (1 Peter 3:15): at home, on the job, wherever we may be. This does not mean that we make ourselves obnoxious by preaching at everyone we meet. Rather, we stay alert to the opportunities that God brings our way, and willingly share with any who show an interest (Colossians 4:5, 6). We must learn to act and speak with wisdom, never compromising the truth of the gospel, but taking care not to become a stumbling block ourselves.

What is the nature of our task?

The Scripture employs several useful images to help us understand the nature of our task.

Ambassadors – Paul says that we are *ambassadors* for Christ (2 Corinthians 5:20). An ambassador is a person who represents someone else, speaking and acting on behalf of another. God has assigned us the role of His ambassadors, entrusting us with the message He wants the world to hear. We are to tell people that God loves them, and that through Christ He has made a way for their broken relationship with Him to be restored. As divine representatives, we deliver this message with the full authority of God Himself. We are to reach out to people on His behalf, urging them to come back to the God who loves them more than they know.

Witnesses – Jesus said that we are to be His *witnesses* (Acts 1:8). A witness is someone who has personal knowledge that he can share with those who do not. A witness is called upon to tell what he has seen and heard (Acts 4:20). We are to tell others what Christ has done for us, how we have experienced His love and grace in our lives. Like John the Baptist (John 1:7), we testify to who Jesus is, the crucified Savior and resurrected Lord.

To explore the courtroom metaphor further: it is helpful to realize that we are not prosecutors, tasked with convicting people of sin; we are not defense attorneys, tasked with explaining and justifying the ways of God or the state of the church; we are not judges, tasked with rendering a final verdict on the lives of people; we are witnesses, tasked with telling “the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth,” as we know it.

Light – Jesus also referred to His followers as the “light of the world” (Matthew 5:14). Jesus brought the light of God into the world, shining with holiness and glory (Hebrews 1:3). But with His return to heaven, the church is left to shine in His place. We are to show the world what Christ is like by what we do and say. Our attitudes and actions should display something of the holiness and love of God (Matthew 5:16). The light of Christ is to be reflected in the lives of His people. In this way, we shine the light of God’s truth and glory into the darkness of a wicked world (Philippians 2:15).

Salt – Jesus also called His followers the “salt of the earth” (Matthew 5:13). The world we live in is under the judgment of God (John 3:19), and is headed for destruction (2 Peter 3:10). But just as salt serves as a preservative, keeping meat and fish from going bad, so our influence can restrain the evil in the world, and thereby hold back the judgment of God (Genesis 18:26). Through words of truth and acts of righteousness, Christians can exercise a positive influence on society and culture, and make the world a

better place for all. However, in order to be effective agents of preservation, we must be careful not to lose our distinctiveness as Christians (Matthew 5:13). It is only in living differently from the world that we can be of benefit to it.

How can we accomplish our task?

To present and represent Christ to the world is indeed a high calling. Who is equal to such a task (2 Corinthians 2:15, 16)? But God has not left us to our own devices. His Holy Spirit provides the wisdom and power we need to preach and live the gospel effectively. Jesus said that the Holy Spirit would make us His witnesses (Acts 1:8). His words proved true in the lives of the apostles, and the same Spirit will work effectually in us. We must learn to depend upon Him to lead us in what to say, to give us strength to proclaim the truth boldly, and to penetrate the hearts of our hearers.

We cannot save anyone. Only Christ can save, and only the Holy Spirit can lead a person to faith. Our part is to be faithful and truthful in declaring the gospel, and to live a life that will confirm the truth of what we say (2 Corinthians 6:3). We do not need to engage in emotional manipulation, or try to impress anyone with eloquent speech (1 Corinthians 2:1). Our confidence is not in our skills and abilities, but in the truth of the gospel message and its power to save (Romans 1:16).

Sharing the gospel is a simple matter of speaking the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15). To this end, we should learn to explain the gospel clearly and understandably, and we must show love and respect to those we seek to bring to Christ. May the Holy Spirit equip us to do this, and use us to bring others into the family of God.

What is the scope of our responsibility?

We have seen that the Great Commission has been given to the whole church, and that evangelism is the responsibility of every Christian. This responsibility encompasses three areas:

- **Personal Contacts** – On an individual level, we are to bear witness to our family and friends, our colleagues and classmates. These are often the most difficult to talk to, but those who know us best are likely to be more influenced by what they see in our lives than what they hear from our mouths.
- **Local Community** – As part of the local church, we should be engaged in regular forms of outreach to our community or city. Every local church is to be a lighthouse beaming forth the gospel message, shining the glory of Christ in the midst of the surrounding darkness. The church is to make a priority of multiplying believers, praying and working to reach the lost in the immediate area. We must join in and do our part, using our gifts to help in any way we can with revivals, crusades, concerts, visitation, etc., and striving to make our church a place where people can meet God.
- **The World** – There is no nation, tribe or race that doesn't need to hear the message of salvation. The gospel of Christ is for everyone, and God intends for this gospel to be preached throughout the whole world (Matthew 24:14). Ever since its beginning, the church has sent forth messengers to take the gospel into lands where it is not yet known (Acts 13:3). Down through the centuries, these missionaries have willingly left their families and homelands, endured hardship and opposition, and even risked their lives to tell the world about Christ.

But missions is not just the responsibility of missionaries. The task is too large and important to leave with just a few. Taking the gospel into the whole world is the responsibility of the whole church, and every believer has a part to play, a job to do (Romans 10:13-15). Missions is a partnership effort between those who go and those who send (Philippians 1:3-5). Those who send play a vital role in praying for the

missionaries and the lost they are trying to reach, and in providing the funds to support their ministry. What role does God have for you? Will you be a go-er or a sender?

Every Christian should be a witness for Christ. Every Christian should help the local church with the task of evangelizing the community. And every Christian should be involved in world missions. Little or much, we can all do something to help fulfill the Great Commission. What will you do?

