

~ *The Practice of Evangelism* ~  
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I'm sure those of you who work in paid employment are familiar with the experience of a job performance review. You know what it's like to have your behaviour and practices put under the microscope and held out for public comment. Those of you who don't work in paid employment may not have experienced this formally, but I'm sure you know what it's like to have your words and actions critiqued by others. Ask any new mum if she feels that her conduct as a mother is open to public review and comment and I suspect the answer will be a resounding "Yes"!

These verses are Paul's reflections on a period of evangelism in Thessalonica, that Paul says was exactly the way evangelism ought to have been done.

This is the very model of ministry he says, calling them to remember exactly what that period of evangelistic enterprise looked like: **you know** brothers and sisters verse 1. **You know** verse 2. Verse 5 **you know**. Verse 11 **you know**.

And so because Paul holds up his experience in Thessalonica as a faultless pattern of evangelism We're going to spend some time looking at it to see what lessons we might learn for our own evangelism whatever the scale whatever our context.

So what actually happened in Thessalonica?

Well, in about 50 AD Paul and his companions Silas and Timothy arrived in the city of Thessalonica during what we call Paul's second missionary journey. This was a trip that was actually intended as a pastoral visit to the places in which Paul and his colleagues had already planted churches. The goal we're told in Acts 15 was to find out how those recent converts were going and growing in the faith. They had only been followers of Jesus for a few years so it's natural that Paul wanted to visit them again and encourage them.

In God's sovereignty they ended up somewhere where they hadn't already shared the good news Thessalonica the capital city of the Roman province of Macedonia.

That's where our reading from Acts 17 picked up the story so we know that over three weeks Paul shared the gospel of Jesus, the Messiah. This three week mission bore significant fruit but also roused significant opposition so for the safety of the new believers Paul and his companions left but then send Timothy back to strengthen the Thessalonians and encourage them in their faith.

That's the abbreviated summary of this evangelistic enterprise.

Looking at Paul's reflection on this time in 1 Thessalonians we see four distinctive of Paul's ministry.

Four characteristics of his approach to evangelism that he seems to be saying "Things happened as they did.

You were brought from death to life

You now look at the world in a completely different way

You enjoy a relationship with the living and true God

Because this is what we did

This is how we acted

This is what it looked like for God to work through us."

I've called these characteristics

- 1) The role of God in evangelism
- 2) Love in evangelism
- 3) Integrity in evangelism
- 4) And then, the response in evangelism that's a slightly different one as we'll see a bit later.

We'll take these in turn and then ask how practically do we shape our evangelism according to each of these?

## *God in Evangelism*

Right up front, Paul emphasises that he exercises his ministry of evangelism under God.

We saw last week that the ministry of evangelism is the ministry of reconciliation it's God's own work in drawing people to himself.

And Paul says in verses 1 – 6

That his evangelistic efforts are undertaken with God's help

That he shares the gospel with God's approval

And that God himself witnesses as to the genuine nature of Paul ministry.

Then in verse 8 he talks about his message as *the gospel of God*.  
verse 9 *the gospel of God* again.

Verse 13 he brought the *Word of God* he mentions that twice.

And through this message people become *God's churches* verse 14.

Who's above and in and working through and saving lives and transforming futures through Paul's evangelistic efforts? It's God!

God is central to Paul's evangelism. That seems obvious! But as strange as it might sound I think we sometimes leave God out of our evangelism.

Perhaps if we're feeling under some sort of obligation to share the gospel with people we don't think of it as sharing God's Word with someone who doesn't know it as much as just doing what we're told.

Or maybe if we do want to evangelise someone it's because we think they need a lifestyle change rather than an eternity change. Have you ever found yourself thinking like that? "I wish that person would become a Christian so they no longer lived that way." Yes a relationship with God can totally transform someone's life there are people here testimony to that but we should be more concerned about their standing before God than their bad habits and anti-social

behaviour. We replace evangelism with social work and God gets left out.

I also think we leave God out of our evangelism because we forget that he wants people to be saved and therefore he helps us in our evangelism.

I don't know about you but it's a great encouragement to me that Paul thought he needed God's help to be bold enough to share the gospel with people in Thessalonica.

***With the help of our God we dared to tell you his gospel in the face of strong opposition.***

And if Paul the Apostle gifted evangelist that he was if he thought it was only with God's help that he was able to tell people about Jesus why on earth would we who consider ourselves normal everyday Christians think otherwise.

Don't leave God out of evangelism. As far as I can see that's only going to be a recipe for disheartening exhausting fruitless ministry.

So let's get practical How does this shape our evangelism? How do we not leave God out?

Well a couple of obvious things and then some suggestions from me.

One – Pray! It's God's work

God's Word

God's gospel

God's people

If you have in mind someone who needs to hear the gospel. Ask God to give you opportunities to speak to them.

Ask God to give you the boldness to take those opportunities!

Ask God to be at work in that person revealing himself to them.

Thank God for choosing you and pouring out his grace on you.

Ask that God will help you dare to tell his gospel despite opposition.

As it's often been said "Pray as if everything depended on God and speak as if everything depended on you."

Another way to make sure we don't leave God out of our evangelism is to make sure we're doing it God's way that is with God's Words.

We need to make sure the message of our evangelism is what God has said not something similar to what God has said.

It's our pluralistic context it's easy to shy away from much of the Bible's message.

But Hell is not just a sad place hell is eternal destruction and punishment.

Jesus said you can't love both God and money.

Being a disciple of Jesus means incurring a cost.

Once we start "sanitizing" our message in an attempt to make it more palatable we've no longer got God's message so why would God be at work through that kind of evangelism?

Memorise Bible passages that speak of what God has done for us in Christ so you can use the very words of God in your conversations with others.

Some other thoughts: Enjoy a high view of the sovereignty of God! By that I mean treasure that fact that God has created the universe in such a way that placed you in close proximity to the people around you! That sounds like I'm just stating the obvious but make the most of the relationships you already have with people in your family office friendship groups. God has placed you as a Christian among them. You are their messenger.

Seek approval from God not from people. On all those personality tests I always rate off the scale on the measurement for wanting people to like me! I just want people to like me there's nothing else to say!

That can be a trap for evangelism because it puts me at risk of sanitizing the message so people don't get offended. I can start evaluating my evangelistic efforts by whether the person is still talking to me or not afterwards rather than on whether I kindly and humbly spoke the truth to them.

Remember God's place in evangelism.

### *Love in Evangelism*

The next characteristic of Paul's ministry about which he reminds the Thessalonians is his love.

We know that there was significant opposition to Paul's ministry in Thessalonica rarely do my evangelistic efforts result in a riot but that's what happened here. And now even in Paul's absence it appears that those who preferred the religious status quo are trying to undermine his ministry and paint him as someone who was only interested in himself.

"He comes in here to persuade you to join his little sect, but as soon as trouble blows up, he disappears leaving you to face the music! Preach and run! That's his approach!"

I'm sure that those opposed to Paul thought that by discrediting him in the eyes of the Thessalonian Christians by making them doubt his honesty and intentions they could weaken Paul's influence over them and they might just drift back into their former way of life.

It's the typical trick of dirty politics isn't it? Sling enough mud at the person and their message is lost.

But Paul says ***we were like young children among you. Just as a nursing mother cares for her children, so we cared for you. Because we loved you so much, we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well. Surely you remember, brothers and sisters, our toil and hardship; we worked night and day in order not to be a burden***

There's really no room for doubt about Paul's love for the people he's sharing the good with, is there?

But I wonder if sometimes our evangelism lacks a genuine love for people.

And I think this is a danger for us especially at times like this when we as a church are trying to be more deliberate in our evangelism. It tends not to be a problem for people very close to us. We love our families and so we long for them to come to faith. But when we're trying to raise our evangelistic temperature more broadly perhaps we sometimes look for soft targets people who won't take too much time before they respond.

I know we're not always like that but I wonder if sometimes that's true that our relationships lack a genuine love.

Cameron's told me a story and I suspect he may have told some of you also about someone he knows who befriended a man in order to share the gospel with him only to do that and find out the man wasn't interested. He then didn't know what to do with the friendship because he hadn't really given it any thought other than I want to share the gospel with this person.

Paul saying "Picture the love a mother has for her child that's the love we have for you". Is there a more poignant or more expressive picture of the love that one person can have for another than this picture of a mother with her child. If you've been part of a family where the mother gets up every 2 hours every night to feed her baby you'll know the love that Paul has for those who he was seeking to evangelise.

How do we cultivate this love for lost people?

Well, you can't manufacture it that's for sure. Wasn't it Groucho Marx who said "The most important thing in life is sincerity and if you can fake sincerity you've got it made"?

We need to pray and ask God to give us his heart for lost people.

That kind of love grows when we share life with people as Paul did. I'm sure you've heard from the lips of a true romantic "Distance makes the heart grow fonder" well the realist says "distance makes the fond heart wander" There is no substitute for being right there in the midst of someone's life in order to grow in love for them. It's hard to love someone you hardly see or speak to and even harder to show your love.

### *Integrity in Evangelism*

Characteristic number 3 is integrity in evangelism. Evangelism is not an especially popular idea today and part of that poor image I know is due to people who claim to bring the good news about Jesus but whose lives are totally at odds with their message. In Paul's evangelism the "evangelise-ees" themselves can witness to his integrity as can God he says.

In public and in private then if we're to speak of the gospel there can be nothing incompatible with the gospel in our lives.

Verse 10 ***You are witnesses, and so is God, of how holy, righteous and blameless we were among you who believed. For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory.***

Remember the opposition to Paul and Silas and Timothy "These guys are no good they're selfish they couldn't care less about you."

Paul says "you know better you know we were unimpeachable in every area".

That's not to say Paul was without sin but he was ***Holy and righteous*** keeping the laws of both God and human society. He was ***Blameless*** nothing in his conduct that would bring him to shame before humans or before God.

And not only were these the marks of Paul's evangelism this was how he lived ***we were among you who believed*** and this is how he

taught the Thessalonians to live *encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory.*

But it doesn't always happen that way, does it? Think of the American televangelists who seem to have few scruples and frequent failures but of course it's not limited to them

The 19<sup>th</sup> Century Baptist Preacher Charles Spurgeon once described a fellow minister who although a gifted preacher lived a terrible life that appeared entirely unchanged by the gospel. The contrast was so great that when he was in the pulpit people said he was so good he should never get down and when he wasn't in the pulpit, people said he was so bad he should never be allowed in it!

But what about us? If you were to ask my non-Christian friends how I measured up on holiness righteousness and blamelessness I wonder what sort of response you'd get? Hopefully the response would be reasonably good but there'd probably still be some - ah - room for improvement, shall we say!

But remember it's not just in their eyes Paul appeals to God as his witness.

God who hears my words of frustration when I'm alone

God who sees my anger even if I manage to keep it inside

God who watches my sinful habits eat away at the effectiveness of my evangelism even if no one else does.

God who knows my motivations aren't always pure

And just so you don't think that you know I'm this really bad person I reckon you're probably exactly the same!

So what do we do about it? How do we ensure integrity in our evangelism or how do we guard against a lack of integrity that might hamper our evangelism?

Well, pray! As with our previous points this is perhaps obvious though easily forgotten. Keep asking God to be at work in you by his Spirit ever increasing your holiness and righteousness and blamelessness.

Flee sin. Work hard to avoid putting yourself in situations where your behaviour might compromise your witness.

If you tend to drink too much at parties and therefore lose your effectiveness for the gospel don't drink or don't go to those parties.

If you generally spend time with your extended family in your home or in some other particular situation that stresses you out to the point where your public holiness is undermined change the context spend time together somewhere else.

Ask people another Christian in your workplace a family member someone else in your school community to help keep you accountable in the way you live your life. So that when your language is .unrighteous when your behaviour verges on that which is at odds with your gospel message they can tell you. And listen to them when they do tell you don't get defensive.

Remember also though that falling short in one of these areas doesn't make evangelism impossible. If you failed to hold your tongue or treated someone poorly or fell short in some aspect of holiness you aren't forever blacklisted from ever being able to share the good news with the people who witnessed that or bore the brunt of it.

It means you need to acknowledge it ask for forgiveness where necessary and move on from it.

### *The Response in Evangelism*

The final lesson in evangelism I want us to learn is unlike our other characteristics not something that Paul says he did but what Paul says happened as a result of his ministry and it's something we need to remember about evangelism or we'll get ourselves all tied up in knots and just completely exhausted.

Evangelism requires a response.

We can't make someone become a follower of Jesus

We can't force someone to believe the good news of salvation

We bring a message and then the person who hears that message must respond.

In Verse 13 Paul says ***And we also thank God continually because when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is indeed at work in you who believe.***

When the Thessalonians heard the good news of Jesus from Paul that didn't make them automatically reconciled to God and followers of Jesus.

Simply hearing the gospel isn't enough is it? If all it took for our friends to become Christians was just to *hear* the good news once I suspect we'd probably all have told everyone we know a long time ago.

But we know that's not how it works, don't we?

We know that what can make evangelism disheartening is that people have to respond. Those in Thessalonica heard the Word of God from Paul and he says they received it and they accepted it as a message from God himself.

If we had to describe our evangelism in the language of verse 13 we could say five things happen:

The word comes from God.

We bring the Word

People hear the word

People receive the word

People accept the word

When you think about it if the process of evangelism is represented by those five steps only one of those steps is actually something we do! We bring the Word.

Now, of course, that's not an exhaustive definition of evangelism it's just Paul's description of what happened in this situation there are other ways to think about what happens when we share the gospel of Jesus with someone but even so this little pattern reminds us, doesn't it of what else is going on!

Not only do people need to hear the message they need to receive it and accept it. And all the time we need to be mindful as we've already seen of God's role in evangelism.

Evangelism of non-Christians starts with God and his message and finishes with our friends and family by God's grace accepting that message as being from God and therefore able to work powerfully within them.

So what do we do with this?

Well, again you guessed it. Pray! If what we call our evangelism is actually something that starts with God and ends with God's Word powerfully at work in someone's life it makes sense to ask God to do his work.

Pray - by name.

Pray for specific responses.

Ask God's Spirit to help people understand the message that you share with them.

Also Share the gospel of Jesus repeatedly. We need to give people multiple opportunities to hear receive and accept the Word of God. 2000 years of Christian history has shown that almost no one responds to the good news of Jesus the first time they hear it. Some research suggests that the non-Christians have the gospel shared with them on average 8 – 12 times before they respond. Don't be discouraged if people don't respond the first time or the second or whatever.

I think we also need to think carefully about the language we use in evangelism. If people are going to hear receive and accept the message we bring they need to understand the message we bring! Can you for example speak of Jesus' death in our place without resorting to Christian jargon that will just confuse your friends? Do they even know what "sin" is? Or do they have some mixed up idea they got from watching TV?

Evangelism isn't just about speaking it's about hearing and responding two things that we don't control but that we can assist.

Let me say just one more thing. Be a person who's known for talking about issues of significance. Everyone knows someone they can chit-chat with. But through your life and conversation show yourself to be a wise and thoughtful person who's not afraid to wrestle with issues of life death relational turmoil suffering sadness family the list goes on.

It's in the midst of dealing with these kinds of issues that many people are most open to hearing the Word of God and by God's grace hearing may be the first step to receiving and accepting.