

Acts | The Incendiary Fellowship

Tell Your Transformation Story

Acts 22.1-22

7.16.17

"Brethren and fathers, hear my defense which I now offer to you."

² *And when they heard that he was addressing them in the Hebrew dialect, they became even more quiet; and he said,*

³ *"I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated under Gamaliel, strictly according to the law of our fathers, being zealous for God just as you all are today. ⁴ "I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and putting both men and women into prisons, ⁵ as also the high priest and all the Council of the elders can testify. From them I also received letters to the brethren, and started off for Damascus in order to bring even those who were there to Jerusalem as prisoners to be punished. ⁶ "But it happened that as I was on my way, approaching Damascus about noontime, a very bright light suddenly flashed from heaven all around me, ⁷ and I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?' ⁸ "And I answered, 'Who are You, Lord?' And He said to me, 'I am Jesus the Nazarene, whom you are persecuting.' ⁹ "And those who were with me saw the light, to be sure, but did not understand the voice of the One who was speaking to me. ¹⁰ "And I said, 'What shall I do, Lord?' And the Lord said to me, 'Get up and go on into Damascus, and there you will be told of all that has been appointed for you to do.' ¹¹ "But since I could not see because of the brightness of that light, I was led by the hand by those who were with me and came into Damascus. ¹² "A certain Ananias, a man who was devout by the standard of the Law, and well spoken of by all the Jews who lived there, ¹³ came to me, and standing near said to me, 'Brother Saul, receive your sight!' And at that very time I looked up at him. ¹⁴ "And he said, 'The God of our fathers has appointed you to know His will and to see the Righteous One and to hear an utterance from His mouth. ¹⁵ 'For you will be a witness for Him to all men of what you have seen and heard. ¹⁶ 'Now why do you delay? Get up and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on His name.' ¹⁷ "It happened when I returned to Jerusalem and was praying in the temple, that I fell into a trance, ¹⁸ and I saw Him saying to me, 'Make haste, and get out of Jerusalem quickly, because they will not accept your testimony about Me.' ¹⁹ "And I said, 'Lord, they themselves understand that in one synagogue after another I used to imprison and beat those who believed in You. ²⁰ 'And when the blood of Your witness Stephen was being shed, I also was standing by approving, and watching out for the coats of those who were slaying him.' ²¹ "And He said to me, 'Go! For I will send you far away to the Gentiles.'"*

²² *They listened to him up to this statement, and then they raised their voices and said, "Away with such a fellow from the earth, for he should not be allowed to live!"*

We're moving quickly to the end of this book...The Acts of the Apostles...the story of how Christianity spread so rapidly through the Roman Empire in the first generation after the resurrection.

Today, the Apostle Paul tells the famous story of how he went from a violent opponent of Christianity to become its greatest defender. We read the actual account in chapter 9 and St Paul tells this story here and once more (26) before the book closes.

And this brings up a word that seems to make everyone a little (or a LOT) uncomfortable and that is the word, “evangelism”. The dictionary defines it as “the practice of preaching or promulgating the Christian message”. It makes many Christians uncomfortable because they feel guilty for not really engaging in the practice.

It makes many non-Christians feel awkward because they don’t want someone trying to convert them...pressure them. Some non-Christians don’t want to even visit a church that practices evangelism because they feel targeted like a hen in a fox house.

Today, I want to show that ...if it’s properly understood and properly motivated, it doesn’t have to be uncomfortable – instead it can be liberating and natural and happy. It can be something as simple as telling your own story...and that’s what Paul was doing in this scene.

Let’s look at evangelism re-considered ...when Christians engage in good evangelism:

1. WHY they do it (what’s the motive?)
2. HOW they do it (what’s the method?)
3. WHAT they do (what’s the message?)

The action slows down now...in fact the whole book spans about 30 years but these chapters (21.17-23.35) cover only about 12 days (similar to the Gospels in that way). This episode is a description of the Apostle Paul... now finished with the famous three Missionary Journeys. He comes to Jerusalem and the Temple...and he’s recognized and arrested.

From now on, for the duration of this book, Paul will be in the custody of law-enforcement and will remain in custody for the last quarter of this book.

But even as Paul is captive the Gospel is NOT... it’s “unhindered” (that’s the VERY last word in this whole book!) and even in chains Paul wants to speak to his own countrymen and peers, Jewish clergymen and thinkers in the heart of Judaism... So what motivates him to do this? What really IS the right motive for evangelizing?

Well in a word: LOVE. Paul loves people and he loves God. Love moves him to speak.

Probably in the days before or after this arrest, Paul wrote his famous Letter to the Romans and IN that letter, Paul refers to his love for people in general but especially his Jewish family and friends. And he even says in Romans CH 9, “My heart is filled with bitter sorrow and unending grief for my people, my Jewish brothers and sisters. I would be willing to be forever cursed-- cut off from Christ!-- if that would save them.” (9.2-3 NLT) That’s real love!

And Paul loves God. He talks about offering people to God as a gift or a kind of sacrifice. In other words, Paul hopes to bring people to God like a human sacrifice – but instead of the sacrifice

killing the people – they become ALIVE: I bring you the Good News so that I might present you as an acceptable offering to God, made holy by the Holy Spirit. (15.16 NLT)

And Christians have done a lot of harmful things over the centuries... but also a lot of amazing heroic acts of missionary zeal motivated by love for people and love for God. I'm reminded of some of the pioneers of the Sudan Interior Mission (SIM) which started in 1893. Two Canadians Walter Gowans, Roland Bingham, and an American Thomas Kent.

They wanted sub-Saharan Africans to know about Jesus Christ and they started a movement that many followed. They all died of Malaria but many, many missionaries followed...motivated by love for people and love for God. They famously told those who followed to pack their possessions in their own coffins because if you made it IN to the interior of Africa you'd probably be buried there! Again – not perfect people but moved by LOVE.

And yet... what really IS the highest and best motive for evangelism ...and what really moved Paul was NOT Paul's love for people or even Paul's love for God – it was God's love for Paul that moved Paul to speak...and tell his story.

To the Church in Corinth Paul writes, "Christ's love controls us. Since we believe that Christ died for all, we also believe that we have all died to our old life." (2 Cor 5.14 NLT)

He told the Galatians, "So I live in this earthly body by trusting in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal 2.19 NLT). It's that sense and trust and conviction that, "YES! Despite my guilt and failings and my weak love for God and people – still, God loves me...God wants me...God crossed the great divide to find/retrieve me... He has nothing against me because Jesus Christ LOVED ME AND GAVE HIMSELF FOR ME...and THAT moves me...controls me!"

And for Paul...and for everyone who gets this, who feels the relief from guilt and knows what it is to be loved by God and ransomed... it's something they want to share...to commend to people who are settling for a counterfeit.

And this is why Paul prayed those prayers for people like us...people who believe the Good News but who somehow still feel burdened by guilt and who think they have nothing to share with anyone because all they can see is their own failings... "I pray that the eyes of your hearts would see so that you will know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory... to be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God." (Eph 1.18, 3.18-19)

The right motive is fullness. The best evangelism is from hearts FULL of the sense that God loves me... and this LOVE is way, way, WAY bigger than I'll ever know in this life. And when we see it, feel it and start to comprehend it...it moves you to speak in a very winsome, spontaneous, unforced way.

That brings us to the METHOD... the best evangelism that's moved by a sense that God dearly loves me that leads to a method that truly identifies with the people to whom we speak.

Paul is standing in front of racial supremacists. They are people who are SOOOOOO tired of being under the thumb of their oppressors, so frustrated and so helpless to change their lot...that they have come to HATE everyone who is racially different from them.

But Paul doesn't say, "Hey! You bunch of bigots and you arrogant racists – stop it! How COULD you?!"

No! He refers to them as "Fathers and Brothers." It's Paul's way of saying, "I am one of you... I am NO better than YOU...and in fact...NO ONE was a bigger racist than I am... I threw men AND WOMEN in prison for being different...I hated Gentiles JUST LIKE YOU DO..."

Being moved by Christ's love for him...a love that Paul never earned or deserved...THAT enabled him to lose that defensive, self-righteous, holier-than-thou attitude that pre-Christian people can smell...and it smells so rotten that they want to run from it!

Paul can very easily find things he has in common with these Jewish-Supremacists... This group has just beaten him and wants to kill him...like they did to Stephen and like they did to Jesus Christ! And Paul could very easily have turned away...in disgust and said, "How COULD you be so blind and so bad!"

But instead he tries to help them see, "Look! I'm just like YOU! I share your zeal and your culture and I AM not better than you are!"

He does everything he can to be non-offensive and to identify with them. He'll refer to Ananias (who was the first Christian Paul met after his conversion) but Paul will refer to this man as, "a man who was devout by the standard of the Law, and well spoken of by all the Jews who lived there..." (12) In other words, "Guys, I'm Jewish! Just like YOU – and I'm NOT asking you to give up your ethnicity or culture!"

He is NOT being offensive... until he has to be. He wants them to hear as much as possible before he says the thing that he knows will be really hard for them to swallow, v. 21, "And Jesus of Nazareth said to me, 'Go! I will send you to the Gentiles! And they listened up to this point and then they screamed out, 'Away with such a fellow...he deserves to die!'"

And Paul had to say that because THEY needed to see: “God’s grace is the only way YOU can be saved. YOU are lost without it...as lost as the gentiles! You need grace because YOUR genetics won’t save you. Your obedience to Moses won’t save you... your diet won’t save you... YOU NEED GOD’S GRACE just as badly as anyone else on this planet...even THEM.”

If their self-righteousness isn’t challenged they will see no need for what Jesus Christ accomplished and they’ll be lost...they’ll go on thinking that they are better than other people...and Paul wants better for them.

He doesn’t lead with it... He does everything he can to exhibit his similarities with them...to show that HE IS JEWISH...and he will parade his own failings as a violent, hateful, self-righteous man... HE DOES NOT see himself as better than they are... BUT... if any person wants to HAVE GOD’S RIGHTEOUSNESS they must let go of their own.

As one of the Puritans famously said, “Men will sooner part with their sins than part with their righteousness.” God will credit US with the moral perfection of Jesus Christ – but only if we admit that we are NOT righteous in ourselves!

It’s NOT enough to say to pre-Christian people, “Hey, I am just like you”... (and WE have to say that)... but we also have to say, “God is calling YOU just as He called ME, to admit that we don’t have it together and God calls us the same way: the ONE WAY to be declared right and acceptable to God...One Way.”

And that brings us to the final point – why good evangelism happens (motive) how it happens (method – i.e. we identify humbly and we do so honestly) and THIRD: what IS it? What are we supposed to say?

And ... this is really a kind of pre-evangelism encounter... i.e. it’s NOT the whole message (the story continues into the next chapter – gets really exciting BTW!) but here Paul is just telling his own story... He’s CLEARLY not saying, “Well this worked for ME and something else may work for YOU.” (That’s NOT good evangelism because it’s NOT true!)

But he’s simply saying at this point, “I was a real religious guy...thought I was righteous...but then I met the Righteous One (v 14) and He changed my life and gave me a new mission/purpose...”

And YOU who ARE Christians, you may have had a kind of Damascus Road Experience like Paul...OR you may be more like Peter (and Peter didn’t have ONE big bang conversion experience but probably many encounters with Jesus of Nazareth that led to a kind of gradual dawning)... POINT is: you may have had an explosive crisis experience OR may have grown up in the church and you can’t really identify an exact moment of huge crisis...but YOU KNOW THAT TODAY YOU BELIEVE...

BUT...all believers in Jesus Christ (big crisis people and grew-up-believing people) ALL believers should be able to tell non-believers: “God is changing me. God doesn’t accept me because I’m a nice guy... Nope! God’s grace is all I GOT...and it’s changing me. Let me tell you about some of those changes...”

That gives us an opportunity to humble ourselves (and use appropriate vulnerability) and tell about a recent repentance experience... and then say, “The Person changing me... is also FOR YOU...He’s for everyone who can’t save himself or herself...”

And that simple understanding should free us from “evang-a-phobia”. Christians: relax! Just tell about YOUR failures and Jesus Christ’s success.

Non-Christians: relax! We’re no better than you are. We both need God’s grace and Good News – it’s available to us both in Jesus Christ, the Righteous One!