



Chapter 5

EVANGELISM AND THE DISCIPLE

Being a disciple begins with a proper relationship to Jesus Christ and having on your heart what is on His. *Making* disciples begins with evangelism. As one person put it, the objective in the Christian life is to populate heaven and depopulate hell.

In evangelism the Christian's pacesetter is none other than the Lord Jesus Himself. The fourth chapter of John provides us with a striking example of Jesus' approach to evangelism.

PICKING THE OPPORTUNITY

Verse 4: "And he must needs go through Samaria." A close look at a map of Palestine in the days of our Lord Jesus reveals that the shortest and easiest route from Jerusalem to Galilee was through Samaria. This, however, was not the way most people traveled. Rather than going through Samaria, they would descend from the heights of Jerusalem to the banks of the Jordan and follow the river's gently winding path to Galilee.

The reason for this dates back to the Assyrian captivity when the ten northern tribes of Israel were displaced. A remnant of those tribes remained in the land and intermarried with other peoples, producing a nation of mixed origin—the Samaritans. For this reason, they were despised by the Jews. These Jewish "thoroughbreds" would go to any length to avoid contact with the Samaritans.

But here we find Jesus needing to go through Samaria. Why? Why did He feel that it was necessary to pass through this region of outcast people? I believe it was to show the universality of the Gospel. The message of our Lord Jesus

was not just for a chosen people, but it was designed for men and women of every tongue, tribe, and race.

Underlying all of this is an important lesson for every aspiring disciple. His objective must be to reach the lost. To do this, he must follow the Saviour's example of being the "friend of publicans and sinners." Too many evangelicals interpret "separation from the world" as meaning separation from worldly people. Evangelism begins with becoming friends with worldly people. The disciple must be faithful to the Scriptures, but he is under no obligation to be faithful to the idiosyncrasies of people who are extra-biblical in their theology.

Verse 9: The woman of Samaria said to Jesus, "The Jews have no dealings with the Samaritans."

What Jesus replied by His interest in her was, "I have dealings with the whole world."

Jesus arrived at Jacob's well tired and thirsty (verse 6,7). His needs were simple and easy to understand. He needed rest and refreshment. But instead of satisfying Himself, He created out of His need an opportunity to witness.

When I first discovered this truth in John 4, I was smitten in my conscience. Often I use my need as an excuse not to witness. I remember, for example, a conference on the East Coast. In the course of the weekend, I had spoken four or five times and had had personal interviews with dozens of people. I was tired, and I did not want to get involved in another conversation. On my return home, I made sure that I was one of the first people on the plane, chose a window

seat, and then quickly put my briefcase on the seat next to me in an attempt to discourage people from sitting there. I allowed my need to become an excuse not to witness.

As Jesus sat resting, He saw a Samaritan woman come to the well to draw some water. She could hardly be considered a “good opportunity.” She was a Samaritan. He was a Jew. Jews had no dealings with Samaritans. She was a woman. He was a man. Men do not counsel women. She was immoral. He was righteous. Righteous people just do not associate with the unrighteous. She was an outcast, He was a great teacher. She had lost her reputation; and He, by His association with her, would stand a good chance of losing His.

One day I was traveling in an old DC3 on one of the commuter airlines. I was already in my seat when a rather portly lady, probably in her 60s, came and sat next to me. She had given an appearance of cheerfulness and friendliness as she made her way to her seat, laughing and joking with others.

When she sat down, I struck up a conversation with her by saying, “My, you are a happy, young lady.”

She reached over, put her hand on my arm, and said, “Young man, you have no idea how miserable I really am. I have all the money I will ever need, but my husband is dead, I have no real friends and have no reason for living.”

By her outward show, there was no way I could have guessed that that woman was a prime candidate for the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Yet, there she was, opening her life to me and letting me know in her own way that she was in desperate need of what the Saviour had to offer. What appeared to be a poor opportunity to share Christ was in fact an excellent opportunity.

PRINCIPLES IN EVANGELISM

There are many principles that can be derived from the ministry of our Lord in the area of

evangelism. Eight of them from John 4 should draw our attention. Possibly this will stimulate your own thinking and cause you in your Bible study to come up with still more.

• *Open the opportunity by asking a favor.*

“There cometh a woman of Samaria to draw water. Jesus saith unto her, ‘Give Me something to drink’ ” (verse 7).

It is part of our human nature to like to have others feel obligated to us, because this makes us feel needed and important. By asking her for a drink of water, Jesus made the Samaritan woman feel needed and important. By revealing His need to her, He created a permissive atmosphere in which she could feel free to talk about her own needs.

A university student once met a beautiful coed in his biology class. Many of his buddies had tried to date her and none of them had met with success. He decided on a novel approach. His sports coat was missing a button, so he asked her if she would sew one on for him. She agreed to do this, and he insisted on returning the favor by taking her out on a date.

In making friends with people, there are many things we can do to make them feel important. On the ski slopes or on the golf course you could say to someone, “Say, I noticed you are really proficient at this. I wonder if you could spare a few moments to give me some tips on how to improve my style.” A housewife can use the same approach with her neighbor by asking to borrow a recipe or a cup of flour or some other supplies.

• *Tailor the approach to the person.*

“Jesus answered and said unto her, ‘If thou knewest the gift of God, and who it is that saith to thee, “Give me to drink”; thou wouldest have asked of Him, and He would have given thee living water’ ” (verse 10).

Jesus did two things here that few women can resist—He offered her a gift and aroused her curiosity.

Shortly after I was married, I purchased a cut glass bowl for my wife's birthday. I brought it home and left it in the trunk of the automobile until it was time to give it to her. That night as we were lying in bed, I mentioned that I had chosen her birthday present and so aroused her curiosity that she could not sleep until I went out to the car and got it for her.

The Lord Jesus was a master at using the right approach for the right person. He did the same thing with Nicodemus in John chapter 3. Recognizing that Nicodemus was a religious leader, Jesus' approach to him was theological: "Ye must be born again."

The great evangelist Dr. Trumble was riding along on a train next to a person who opened a flask and offered him a drink of whiskey. Dr. Trumble declined the offer. A few minutes later the man repeated the offer, and again Dr. Trumble turned him down. The third time the offer was made, the man said to Dr. Trumble, "I bet you think I am a rather evil man doing all this drinking, don't you?"

"No," said Dr. Trumble. "I was thinking what a generous man you are to keep offering me a drink." That entree was sufficient for Dr. Trumble to lead the man to Christ before the journey ended.

• ***Choose the questions you want to answer and ignore the others.***

The woman of Samaria said to Jesus, "...the Jews have no dealings with the Samaritans" (verse 9). Jesus chose to ignore her controversial point. The Samaritan woman again brought up a point of controversy, this time pertaining to the place where people ought to worship God (verse 20). Now she was striking at a critical issue, and Jesus chose to respond.

In evangelism, develop a feel for the important questions and major in them. Generally speaking, these are questions that deal with getting to know God. Jesus geared His conversation to answering her needs rather than getting entangled in peripheral issues.

When you talk to people about Christ, all kinds of questions come up. "If the Bible says you cannot marry your sister, who did Cain marry?" "What will God do with people who have never heard the message of salvation?"

Many times one is not quite sure how critical the issue is to the person. Is it a genuine problem with him, or is he trying to sidestep the real issues? To help determine this, you can counter with, "If you knew the answer to this question, would it make any difference in your relationship with Jesus Christ?" If his answer is no, you might suggest that the real and important questions center around getting to know God in a personal way. If, however, his answer is yes, then do all that you can to reply. If you don't know the answer, be honest, tell him that you don't, and that you will endeavor to get it for him.

• ***Strike for the "open nerve" that causes the person to expose his need.***

The Samaritan woman began to argue with Jesus about His ability to draw water by Himself from Jacob's well. Jesus countered with the statement, "Go, call thy husband and come hither" (verse 16). She replied that she had no husband, and Jesus completely exposed her with the comment, "Thou hast well said, I have no husband; for thou hast had five husbands; and he whom thou now hast is not thy husband" (verse 17).

The Gospel is the good news that God can change an individual. This Good News is based on the assumption that each person's needs can be met. In evangelism, therefore, one of the first objectives is to get the person to expose his need.

Suppose you are walking down the street and a stranger appears from nowhere, grabs hold of you and says, "You look sick. Come with me into my office, and I will operate on you and make you feel better." What do you think your response would be? I would probably flee as fast as I could.

We must be careful not to be guilty of the same approach in evangelism. It is probably not the best approach to walk up to a stranger and say something to the effect, “Do you want to be saved?” Rather, concentrate on getting to know the person. Ask probing questions— even before you begin to engage him in a conversation about Jesus Christ. Find out what his needs are, what is occupying his thinking.

A few months ago I was talking to a young coed who was returning from home to the university. In the course of our conversation, she happened to mention that she was majoring in sociology. She had her heart set on being a social worker. I asked her why she chose this career, and she said she had a desire to help people. At this point I was able to ask her what she felt were the real needs people faced. This triggered off a deep, spiritual conversation, during which I was able to share the Gospel.

• ***Tell the truth even if it hurts.***

“Ye worship ye know not what. We know what we worship, for salvation is of the Jews” (verse 22). This statement by the Lord Jesus, “salvation is of the Jews,” was the very thing that turned Samaritans off. Her initial response to such a statement would probably have been, “Well, here is another bigoted Jew who thinks He’s got all the answers.” Yet Christ’s straightforwardness here gave her confidence and trust in His character when He revealed to her that He was the Messiah.

If we hedge on things we know to be true, then we convey to our listeners a lack of trust in our own convictions.

Bible-believing Christians sometimes become embarrassed by the way God acts. To that often-asked question, “Why did God destroy whole nations in the Old Testament,” our inward response frequently is, “Oh, Lord, You’ve got Yourself into trouble again! Let’s see if I can dig You out of this one.”

As you witness, you will meet people who will look you right in the eye and ask, “Do men

really go to hell if they don’t believe in Jesus Christ?” What will you do? Will you tell them what you know to be the truth? Or will you seek to run around it and change the subject?

This does not mean that we are to be tactless or obnoxious as we talk to people about spiritual truths. Kindness, patience, and long-suffering should be the virtues that characterize our lives (2 Tim. 2:24,25). But having said this, we must be willing to tell people the truth.

• ***Agree with the person as much as possible.***

This principle brings in balance principle number 5. The Jews and Samaritans could not get together on the simplest of questions; namely where God was to be worshipped (verses 20-24). Agreeing with the woman as much as possible, Jesus said, “Well, you are partly right. The issue is not between Jerusalem and this mountain. God is a Spirit. You worship Him in spirit and in truth.”

A buddy of mine was witnessing to a friend who retorted, “I’m a Catholic and you are a Protestant,” as though that should terminate the conversation between them.

My friend said, “Well, that’s interesting. I have more in common with my Catholic friends than I do with many of my Protestant friends.” That simple statement was enough to bridge a potential argument and allow the conversation to continue.

• ***Don’t allow the conversation to get off the subject.***

This principle is seen in how the woman responded to the Lord Jesus when He revealed that the man she was living with was not her husband. She immediately tried to change the subject by getting into a theological argument over where God was to be worshipped. She tried to avoid the moral issue by asking a theological question.

This often happens when one is talking to

people about Jesus if the conversation becomes a bit too personal. Instead of facing up to the personal matters, they might counter with, “What about all those people in non-Christian countries who have never heard the message of Jesus Christ?”

In pursuing the real issue, we must lovingly point out that the question is not so much, “What about people who have not heard,” but rather, “What will you do with Jesus Christ now that you have heard?” However, if this is a genuine question that is an obstacle to the person becoming a Christian, then we must do all we can to find the answer for him (see principle 3).

- ***Be sensitive to how the Holy Spirit is working in the person’s life.***

Jesus did not push her. He engaged her in conversation and allowed her to ponder the implications of what had been said. As you read through the story, you notice that salvation became her idea, not just His. She ended up truly wanting it. He did not push it on her.

A beautiful illustration of this is found in Acts 2:36-38. Peter had just finished his great sermon at Pentecost. He gave no invitation. He did not tell his audience what to do. He merely ended with a divine claim—Jesus was the Christ. But what he said shook them; and because the Spirit of God was working in their hearts, salvation became their idea, not Peter’s. They took the initiative, asking, “Men and brethren, what shall we do?”

Peter’s reply was, “Repent and be baptized every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ.”

When you talk to people about Christ, you can often tell where they are by their changing view of who He is. This can be seen by the Samaritan woman’s response to Christ. First, she calls Him a Jew (verse 9). Next, she addresses Him as Sir (verse 11). Then she calls Him a prophet (verse 19). Finally, she confesses Him as the Christ (verse 29).

PASSION TO DO THE JOB

Jesus said that His food was to do God’s will. This is what concerned Him, what was uppermost in His mind. “Jesus saith unto them [the disciples], ‘My meat is to do the will of Him that sent Me, and to finish His work. Say not ye, “There are yet four months, and then cometh harvest”? Behold, I say unto you, “Lift up your eyes, and look on the fields; for they are white already to harvest” (John 4:34-35). Jesus does not say here that He is exercising His gifts, or that He really loves to talk to people about their eternal destiny. He simply says that He is doing the will of God.

People shun evangelism because they say it is not their strength, it is not their gift, or they do not enjoy doing it. I can certainly empathize with that. Evangelism is engaging the enemy in what the Bible calls “spiritual warfare.” It means fighting the forces of darkness for the souls of people. Let’s face it; few people enjoy fighting.

A buddy of mine, a marine infantry officer, once confided that he loved to lead men. He enjoyed going out on bivouac and practicing maneuvers with them. He loved the thrill of the dress parade. But when he was in Vietnam engaging the enemy in combat and seeing his own men die, he realized that he hated fighting.

What is true in physical warfare is equally true in spiritual warfare. If you do not enjoy engaging people in spiritual combat, don’t feel that you stand alone. Few people enjoy it. That really is no the question, nor is the question one of whether evangelism is your gift or your strength.

The only relevant question is whether it is the will of God—and we know from the Scriptures that the will of God is for us to do the work of evangelism. ***The disciple’s ministry begins with evangelism.***