

Ambassadorship

“...God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation,”

2 Corinthians 5:19.

I was driving through Virginia recently on business and was listening to a broadcast on a local radio station. There was a lady giving her opinion about how Christians should witness to non-Christians. It was a long discussion on the general attitude and approach that she thought Christians should have while talking with others, and she spoke to the interviewer about her own experiences as well. She spoke very highly of “relationship evangelism.” I’m sure most of you have heard this phrase. This is the idea that friendship and relationship is the key to effective evangelization and winning the lost. She thought of it as the only proper way to go. She thought that the idea of Christians just randomly approaching strangers with the Gospel in evangelism was “using them.” According to her view, it was a rude thing to approach strangers with the Gospel and an affront to evangelism itself. I’m happy anytime someone is sharing their faith biblically, however, I believe she’s wrong and her conversation with this radio interviewer got me thinking about why. Effectively, her opinions made outreach with the Gospel to strangers down-right inappropriate and generally unloving. She was somewhat gracious in her opinion but I could not put myself in her place. I think that “Relationship evangelism” and the idea that we should only witness to people that we know is another excuse to do away with any sort of discomfort in our spoiled culture. We don’t want people to think us strange and so we offset or eliminate altogether the awkward nature of evangelism by reserving it only to friends. We don’t want to be rejected and so we cease putting ourselves out there for rejection. I know that relationships have a great place in evangelism. In fact, all things being equal, it nearly always makes things better, however, the Christian mandate, if it’s to be lived, does not fit with such an ideal. We’re not friends with everyone and there’s far too much work to be done.

I know that God brings people into the faith in different ways. Sometimes He does it gently as with Lydia, Acts 16:14. Sometimes rough as with Paul, Acts 9:1-6. With me it was rough. It is true in a Biblical context to say that God sometimes works in mysterious ways, but I don’t think that this means that we in the church should try to work in mysterious ways as well. I don’t think we could even if we wanted to. I think we should know what we wish to do in outreach or evangelism and train on how to do it to the best of our ability. I wrote about this in a previous letter called *Systematic Evangelism*. It’s also available on Biblecia.com. Check it out for some great quotes from many church leaders on the subject.

Is the Biblical or spiritual picture of evangelism like three friends seated at a table having tea? Is it a picture of God, the Christian and the non-Christian engaged in warm palaver about the

things of heaven? Is it God and two of His children, one just not yet accepting it, seated in joking posture at ease with one another? It would seem that this is the image, either by action or omission, that's painted in the minds of many who forget the true circumstances surrounding the situation, but I do not believe it's correct. In fact, I think it betrays some pretty obvious deficiencies found in the modern "gospel" of many in our day.

So what is a proper Biblical picture of evangelism? What imagery might we as Christians do well to have fixed in our minds as we seek to communicate the Gospel to others be they strangers or friends? Is it a natural or spiritual reality that should create that image? The purpose of this letter is to call to mind the battlefield. For me it comes down to properly respecting the spiritual relationship between God and fallen un-regenerate man as we find it. We don't know the hearts of strangers or friends. We don't know their motives in life all that well either. What we do know is how God describes the heart of man and man's general attitude towards Christ and all things holy. We must keep these things in mind. Not how we would have it to be, or as it may become, but how it actually is. This doesn't exclude or negate our desires for peace, but we ought not to pretend to operate in anything other than reality as God defines it. Then what is that relationship like between God and non-Christians considering: 1) that we know no one's heart, and yet 2) that we have the Scripture's testimony? Is it a friendly or unfriendly relationship? How do we know? What does the Scripture say on the matter?

Let's briefly consider some of Peter's preaching before the people of Israel. God has given us all tremendously terrifying insight into the hearts of men most closely in history as we read the holy writings surrounding the Israelites. They represent us all in our humanity. We're all just as human as they were. Peter participated in a miracle of healing and preached to many strangers one saying,

...you denied the Holy One and the Just, and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, and killed the Prince of life, whom God raised from the dead, of which we are witnesses... Yet now, brethren, I know that you did it in ignorance, as did also your rulers. But those things which God foretold by the mouth of all His prophets, that the Christ would suffer, He has thus fulfilled. Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that He may send Jesus Christ, who was preached to you before... To you first, God, having raised up His Servant Jesus, sent Him to bless you, in turning away every one of you from your iniquities, Acts 3:14-15, 17-20, 26.

Peter understood the situation and yet preaches the Gospel truly. He mentions repentance and brings the message of Christ to the people. He doesn't present the attitude of these people and their actions toward Jesus as ok or pretend as if they did nothing wrong. He's not painting a "God loves you and I'm your best bud" kind of picture. He speaks of God's great mercy in Jesus and tells the people what they ought to do. My

whole point in citing this passage is to show that the ambassador Peter understood the situation well and functioned in it as it was. We would be wise to do the same. Can we at all say that this is what we do when we share the Gospel? Do we address the situation or at least understand it as it is? I'm sure this message would be offensive to that lady on the radio if it wasn't the Apostle Peter presenting it. She would say Peter's using these people. After all, they weren't all his friends.

Many preachers have adopted a "God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life" approach to evangelism. I once did long ago, but this approach is false. In this they act as if SIN is ok because everyone does it. They pretend that everything's alright between the sinner and God. They imply that God's not angry and has nothing against anyone. They may not say this, but the idea undergirds everything they do say. They present the message of the Gospel, not as the forgiveness of sin, but as an assurance of heaven. Sin is only mentioned as an abstract concept; it's not brought home or made personal. It isn't dealt with at all really. They preach a Gospel devoid of repentance and attempt to replace it with decisions. In such a message the preacher totally seems to forget that men are dead in sin before God without Christ. A false gospel is then, sometimes even whimsically, presented as a means to happiness, health, gain, or heaven. Such follies certainly contribute to the lack of fidelity we see in many supposed disciples in the church today. Many have been convinced of a false standard of conversion, like saying a prayer, or that simply accepting certain facts about Jesus makes one a Christian. Instead of repent it's relax. Instead of faith it's feeling. Instead of God then it's an idol.

Have you ever seen a movie where two warring armies are depicted on a field separated only by a span as two commanding officials move in to discuss terms? If the two leaders cannot reach an agreement then the battle ensues. This is something like the image I've got fixed in my mind when I consider the relationship between fallen man and God, and it doesn't mean that I don't love my enemies, or that I see them as less than human. Some would say that this picture I've painted is wrong, but I think they operate as they'd like things to be rather than the way Scripture describes them to be. The lady on that radio station in Virginia must not see men and God as enemies. She's wrong. She'd likely describe their relationship as an estranged love, or disconnected emotion, but I think this is a pernicious error. I'd like to try to explain why I think that something like warring armies is a right picture, and what it motivates me to do.

Paul brought Christ to Onesimus while he was imprisoned in Rome ergo the phrase "...while in my chains" in Philemon 1:10. Jesus is the go-between between Onesimus and God the Father. Paul was the earthly ambassador between the army of Onesimus and the armies of God into which he was enlisted, 2 Timothy 2:3-4. I've often marveled at God's amazing providence in bringing those two together as He did. Onesimus surrendered. Paul was the blessed peacemaker. This is the place of all evangelists who go in the power and commission of God. Jesus is the only mediator. He's the only one who can ultimately make peace, but as the Gospel proclaimer speaks for God he is an ambassador for the King of kings Himself. Do you know that when you humbly preach the Gospel the arc angels may be listening? So do you go out shod for

battle with the sword of the spirit in your hand, Ephesians 6:17, or with flowers? Look now at the officials negotiating terms between the armies on this field. When the sign on the ambassador's waving flag is the cross of peace then amen *in hoc signo vinces*, or "in this sign conquer." We conquer, however, not as Constantine did, but with a better sword. It is the sword of the peace, power and love of the Holy Spirit. The battle is a spiritual picture and the weapons are not manmade. It's this setting that informs the wise ambassador. There is a battle and we're in between it. Jesus does not send out His disciples as lambs amidst bunny rabbits, but amidst wolves, Luke 10:3. Many modern "evangelists" preach and invite men to a form of evangelism that makes them think all the wolves are gone.

Paul speaks of his evangelistic role in his letter to the church community in Corinth and says, "...We are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us; we implore you on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God..." 2 Corinthians 5:21. Please remember, if there's a need for reconciliation then we should be aware of why. Men are not prodigal sons; they're alienated enemies, Colossians 1:21. The relationship between Paul and Onesimus, as it appears in Paul's letter to Onesimus' master Philemon, was very paternal. It was very loving. Onesimus is spoken of as a beloved son yet Paul knew God's anthropology, as it would seem, better than any other. Paul received Onesimus freely. We should also receive those who come to Christ as freely. We do this, however, aware of the situation. Let's look more at God's rebels. Paul spoke of the carnal mind as hostile to God, Romans 8:6-7. God taught us all even before the flood that men were wholly sinful, Genesis 6:5. Jesus Himself says that the very source of the problem is the center of man's being from birth, Mark 7:21. The flesh profits nothing, John 6:63. God teaches us without exception in the Bible that men are by their very nature children of wrath, Ephesians 2:3. This is their natural state from birth. This is why men must be *born again*. God says that men are disobedient because they are influenced by satan from birth, Ephesians 2:2. Men are so wicked by nature that Jesus can refer to all of us as children of the devil himself. He did say this of some of the Jews in His own day, John 8:44. An ambassador must be righteous unlike those in the world. Listen to what the Apostle John says: "In this the children of God and the children of the devil are manifest: Whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is he who does not love his brother," 1 John 3:10. Notice that there are two types of children mentioned here, not just one. These pictures represent any unconverted mind not renewed/renewing by the grace of God. If you meet the devil on the street tonight is all well between him and God? How about his children? So, even your friend who's nice to you but is without Christ and is therefore by nature a child of wrath, is all well with him and God? No, dear friends. These are the facts of the matter; who cares how we would prefer things to be? Don't these truths affect how we preach? This should not make us cold toward men; it should make us aware! It should take away the pretenses. This is where ambassadorship between these kingdoms comes into view. Carnal minds are the minds of those who called for the crucifixion of Jesus and asked that His blood be upon them and their children, Matthew 27:25. Those were un-restrained carnal minds demonstrating man's natural hostility. The minds of many of the religious leaders in Jesus' day represent the hostility of the minds of men the same today. Men are no different. In

our natural state, man is not neutral before God, neither is he at all good, Mark 10:18; Romans 3:12. We are evil. We're not sinners because we break God's moral law; we break God's moral law because we are sinners. We have been wholly affected by sin and died in Adam, Romans 5:12. We are totally depraved. Romans chapters 1-3 make this abundantly and overwhelmingly clear. Those chapters serve as a perfect example of what the mind of man is like before God. How are they then in our eyes as we go out to win them? Do we not seek to have the mind of Christ? Did Christ commit Himself to His enemies capriciously? No, because He knew their hearts, John 2:23-25; yet He went and preached faithfully. This then begins to show us what the relationship between an unholy man and a holy God is actually like. We know it but it does not stop a loving and heart-felt outreach and evangelism. God is so merciful to come and stay with any of us.

The modern relationship evangelism approach is often not just a change in method, but a surrender of the message. It's often an attempt to remove the entire sting of the Christian witness. Friends, you cannot remove the sting of sin; only God can.

Paul knew that Onesimus, as in all natural men, could not and did not love God, yet, because of his faith he is loved as a son. Being led by unseen providence to find the great Apostle in Rome, Onesimus, the beggar came. We must understand what Paul meant when he wrote about the hostility of man against God, yet act as Paul acted when reaching out with the Gospel to the slaves of sin and death, John 8:34. Because we know that man is man, we remember that we're all the same unless God intervenes. This prompts humility and love, not pride or arrogance. We go out as ambassadors because we do not want to see God's enemies, which are our enemies, trodden down by the angelic cavalry on the last day, Revelation 14:19-20. We are moved to intercede for the enemies of God out of a love for God and a love for them. God might never bring you or me a stranger like Philemon. We may never be approached in such a way so we must go to them. That's our charge. We must seek them out. God is sovereign over it all. Our going is not random; it's appointed from before the foundation of the world, and it's good to go, Ephesians 2:10.

The minds of men are at war with God and the armies of the Lord will not encamp forever. It would be no battle. There would be no contest. There would not be a siege, yet men would feign the fight. Man in all his rage would rather die than submit unless God softens the heart. We representatives go out to meet them having been sent out. We take them the King's terms. We offer the mercy of a vastly superior and incomparably dominant force. We are gentle, tactful, ambassador-like, but we cannot forget what God has said about man in His word. They are rebels. This is the way things are. We must remember it. If we don't it won't be long before we change the terms that the King has told us to present. This is exactly what we see in many "Gospel" presentations today. The King has told us to tell them that if they'll repent and trust in the Son then they will have mercy. This is serious business for serious ambassadors. How do you make sense of the gravity of this arrangement in your evangelism? Do you approach a rebellious army and say, "the King loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life?" That may be the

case, but it's both an inappropriate assessment and presentation of the situation as well as a misrepresentation of the necessity of the cross and the grace of God bestowed by it. Jesus did not die because things were even close to alright between God and man.

This is what I mean by understanding the current relationship between God and un-regenerate (un-saved) men *as we find them* on the battlefield. They are not friends. There is a dispute to be settled. If we act as if there isn't then we're liars. So even though the ambassador may speak of the King's mercy, love and patience; that mercy, love and patience is not a given, or to be taken for granted. It is predicated on surrender. Without surrender God will one day grind men to powder in His righteousness as Jesus says, Matthew 21:44. Do we at all have a "grind them to powder" fear for them? We will if we know where we're standing- that it's on a battlefield. If we act as if God has not threatened such things then we're unwise ambassadors. Such terms set the temperature of the messenger. Ambassadors must remember that the King's mercy is not cheap but it is offered freely. So learn the traditions of the rebel armies. Respect custom and cultural considerations as much as does not hinder the King's terms, or misrepresent His character. Approach, respect and honor those you'd seek to win, but don't forget where you stand and why you're there. You're not introducing two pals; you're negotiating surrender.

Carnal man is not a friend to God. God is not a friend to them either. God has enemies and He declares it frequently throughout both testaments. God tells the Messiah repeatedly even looking to the future after Jesus' ascension and exaltation into heaven to, "Sit at My right hand, till I make Your enemies Your footstool," Matthew 22:44; Psalm 110:1; Hebrews 1:13. God has many enemies. Don't pretend when you're witnessing to non-believers that everything is honky-dory between them and God. Scripture does not say or present that. Many false "gospel" messages act as if all is well. That's why I'm writing this letter. Wisdom is in knowing the terrain. The key to the salvation of men is not our friendships with them or going through their felt needs, but our faithfulness with the Gospel message to friends and strangers alike. It's trusting in God and in the power of the Gospel. If that means we're witnessing to friends, great. If it means we're witnessing to strangers, great. We should be doing both. We should be wise in our approach and speak to men as we would have them speak to us if we were still in their place.

Ambassadors mind their audience. I remember giving a speech years ago in Iraq to a panel of my Army superiors. The group consisted of one Colonel, several Majors and about six Captains. I was a Second Lieutenant. They gave me feedback as a group afterward and the first thing the Colonel said was, "CYA, consider your audience." Their focused critique of my presentation, as was the purpose of the exercise, caused me to consider my posture, my hand-held material, my power point slides, my quotations, hand-outs, eye contact, timing, font sizes, lighting, humor, gesturing, everything. Knowing and considering well exactly who I was speaking to changed much in my work and in subsequent presentations. Knowing my evangelism audience causes me to do the same. If I'm never to cast my pearls before pigs I must know what my pearls are and who the pigs are. Men are forever cut off from God because of their sins. This is why we are ambassadors pleading for reconciliation. There must be a tension in order to plead

reconciliation, right? If we present the Gospel to others as if everything's ok then it makes reconciliation incomprehensible or unnecessary. In other words, if everything's alright between God and un-regenerate man as we find them then what is all this SIN, cross and repentance stuff about? It makes people indifferent to divine wrath and it will not be long at all before they become indifferent to grace. Ambassadors love to see God's enemies become His allies. Though this is true it should not cloud or falsify the situation. We should not act as if God and the sinner are friends. Ambassadors do not excel in ignorance, they understand the situation into which they're sent and apply their work the same. I found this paragraph somewhere on the internet once and I'd like to share it with you. It's a good example for the Christian I think:

It is reported of a Chinese emperor that, on being informed that his enemies had raised an insurrection in one of his distant provinces, he said to his officers, "Come follow me; and we will quickly destroy them." He marched forward, and the rebels submitted upon his approach. All now thought that he would take the most signal revenge, but were surprised to see the captives treated with mildness and humanity. "How!" cried the first minister. "Is this the manner in which you fulfill your promise? Your royal word was given that your enemies should be destroyed; and behold; you have pardoned them all, and even caressed some of them." "I promised," replied the emperor with a generous air, "to destroy my enemies. I have fulfilled my word; for see, they are enemies no longer. I have made friends of them.

This is something like what we'd like to see. God has not dealt with us according to our sin. He has been gentle to His elect and has made many friends from His enemies. Ambassadors remember this as they go between the two opposing forces. They are not ignorant to the environment. They are aware of the bloodshed between the two kingdoms represented. All the unlawfully spilled blood on earth since Cain is against God and an act of open rebellion. Should He wish to consume His enemies no one could say it is wrong. God is most patient.

This is why the whimsical approach to evangelism is dangerous. It simply does not reflect the situation between God and man as we find them without Christ. Paul would not preach a Gospel devoid of repentance to Onesimus, Peter would not preach a Gospel to the Jews without speaking of the necessity of repentance. We should not either. There is an issue to be resolved between God and man; not just a decision to be made. Sin must be put away in God's judgment, Romans 7:1-6. I love what Ray Comfort says when he talks about "evangelists" asking people to "make decisions for Jesus" without mentioning sin and calling for repentance. He says that's like standing before a judge having been convicted of some serious multiple crimes and your answer back is "Judge, I accept you." That's ridiculous. It would make no difference. The same is true with the Gospel. Going out with the message of the cross and not talking about sin and therefore the necessity of repentance and faith is ridiculous. Please hear me: It makes the cross worthless. Preaching a "gospel" without understanding the battlefield then is like lighting a candle at noon or giving sand to a man dying of thirst. It's like handing a blind

man a painting and asking his opinion. We might as well be Roman soldiers standing in front of the cross waving our arms saying, “Nothing to see here, folks move along. Go about your business.” The cross was a terrible thing that brought about salvation for all of God’s elect. Now we may not always know the situation between those to whom we speak and God, but we should not proceed haphazardly into the fray. Wise ambassadors understand the situation into which they’re sent. We should remember how many ambassadors have died on these fields, Mark 12:1-9. It is better, if nothing else, to err on the side of caution.

I’m not saying we go to men and say that they’re wicked and condemned and be jerks about it. I’m saying that we as ambassadors learn that there are sides. This will affect what we say and how we say it. We’ll remember the war and therefore not move out carelessly. We’ll remember that all is not well and that our message should not act as if it is. Though we understand the situation between God and men, we are not to act as God. We do not know the hearts of men. We are merely ambassadors for God. We are but unprofitable servants doing what it is our duty to do when we evangelize. We should seek to help men see their sin all the while seeking to help men see the salvation that God offers.

We should use the law, the Ten Commandments in evangelism, as a means to illuminate what SIN actually is. This sets the stage for the gracious King’s terms. The Law heightens the sense of the sinner so that he might hear the clanks of his enemy’s armor. It clears the fog that might obscure the danger. It is the groundwork for understanding why there needs be reconciliation. Sin is what men must repent of in order to be received by God. God is not the Father of unregenerate men, but pities those who fear Him, Psalm 103:13. When we use the law lawfully it conveys the current situation correctly. When we do this peaceably and respectfully, as ambassadors, then we’re doing our job to make honorable and necessary the cross. The law, like nothing else, shows men by conscience that God is not on good terms with them. God plays for keeps. He is not a doting papa in the heavens winking at sin. There’s a big difference in the minds of us all between breaking a dad’s rules and breaking a king’s rules. God is king of all and Father to many.

Please be sensitive to the Holy Spirit in these matters and give attention to His word. There is no one sole way to evangelize, but if we’re not sensitive to the truths of the situation between God and man then we’re going about everything all wrong.

Thank you for your attention to this letter.