

Evangelizing Sin City

by Mariano Di Gangi

The sermon emphasizes the importance of evangelism and the need to share the good news of Jesus Christ with others, using the example of Paul's ministry in Corinth.

Duration: 28:26

Scripture: Acts 18:5, Acts 18:8-18, 1 Corinthians 2:2

Topics: "Evangelization"

Description

The sermon transcript discusses the message of the evangel, the good news, which is described as the word of God. The essence of the message is that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah anointed by God. Jesus is portrayed as the infallible prophet, merciful priest, and righteous king. The sermon also criticizes certain individuals who reduce evangelism to a showbiz spectacle, exploiting religious sensibilities. The sermon is divided into three parts: the evangelists, the evangelized, and the evangel.

Transcript

Let us hear now the reading of God's written word as it is recorded for us by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit in the book of the Acts of the Apostles, chapter 18, reading the first 11 verses. After this, Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. There he met a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had ordered all the Jews to leave Rome.

Paul went to see them, and because he was a tentmaker as they were, he stayed and worked with them. Every Sabbath he reasoned in the synagogue, trying to persuade Jews and Greeks. When Silas and Timothy came from Macedonia, Paul devoted himself exclusively to preaching, testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Christ.

But when the Jews opposed Paul and became abusive, he shook out his clothes in protest and said to them, Your blood be on your own heads. I am clear of my responsibility. From now on, I will go to the Gentiles.

Then Paul left the synagogue and went next door to the Christus, the synagogue ruler, and his entire household believed in the Lord, and many of the Corinthians who heard him believed and were baptized. One night the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision, Do not be afraid, keep on speaking, do not be silent, for I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you because I have many people in this city. So Paul stayed for a year and a half, teaching them the Word of God.

This is the account of how the servants of Jesus Christ went about evangelizing Sin City. Now this evening, what I propose to do is to deal with the text and the subject that is involved under three simple straightforward headings. First, the evangelists.

Second, the evangelized. And third, the evangel. We begin with the evangelists.

When we hear that word evangelist in our time, people have mixed reactions, and understandably so. I hold in my hand a card that arrived in my mailbox this week. I'm not going to tell you the source of the card, but I will divulge some of its contents.

I thought they were kidding, but they were in dead earnest. Each year so-and-so and his display travel across thousands of miles with spectacular and impressive multi-image programs destined to grab the attention of people, entertain them, and force them to think. This multi-projector, multi-screen, laser-highlighted production reaches out with a pizzazz which excites as well as communicates.

Each production is Bible-based and Christ-centered, and is personally introduced and wrapped up by this particular person. And it's headed, looking for an exciting event that will knock their socks off. This is the carnival vaudeville kind of level to which some people would reduce evangelism.

Not evangelists at all, just engaged in a bit of showbiz and exploiting the religious sensibilities of God's people. But the term evangelist has been brought into even greater disrepute, not merely by people who engage in gimmickry as a substitute for the gospel, but by the sort of evangelists and televangelists who can't keep their hand out of the treasury and their hands off the women. How we need to get back to redeeming that term evangelist and putting biblical content into it.

There's one person in the New Testament who is called the evangelist. He's a man by the name of Philip, who incidentally also has another distinction. He had four single daughters who all were messengers of God.

They were prophets who spoke the word of the Lord. Whether they were ordained or not is entirely beside the point. God gave them a message and they delivered it.

Philip is called the evangelist, and since scripture attaches that description to him, we can learn what an evangelist is by looking at Philip as he goes about his work. We see Philip in the city of Samaria bringing people the good news, and great joy comes to the citizens of that city. We see him going down to a desert road to meet with a high official of the Ethiopian queen, and he finds that man reading from the sacred scroll of the prophecy of Isaiah, but the man is mystified, and Philip, beginning with that same scripture from the Bible, points him to Jesus Christ.

That is the work of the evangelist. Now, who were the evangelists who evangelized Sin City according to Acts 18? Well, you say Paul was the evangelist. Well, he was certainly involved.

A great variety of verbs is used to describe his evangelistic activity in the city of Corinth. We are told that he lectured, that he preached, that he testified, that he taught, and all of this with one purpose, to persuade people to drop their resistance and receive Jesus as Savior and Lord. Paul was one of the evangelists involved in the evangelizing of Sin City, but he wasn't the only one.

There were people like Aquila and Priscilla. They were Jewish. They had been evicted from Rome by the edict of Claudius Caesar.

These Jews were also Christians. They were tentmakers by trade. They had a church meeting in their home.

They knew the scriptures well enough that together they could minister to a man like Apollos, set him straight, and make him more effective than ever for the work of God. And they took Paul into their partnership so that working with them at tentmaking he could keep body and soul together and he would use his Sabbath one day in seven for the preaching of the Word of God in the local synagogue. So Aquila and Priscilla were associated with Paul as evangelists supporting the outreach.

Then you've got Silas and Timothy. They too were co-workers. They too were collaborators in the work of the gospel and must be included as part of the missionary team.

But there's something more than that. Notice the reference to the fact that Silas and Timothy come from Macedonia and when they arrive in Corinth from that time onward, Paul devotes his full time to preaching the Word of God. What's happened? Before they came from Macedonia, Paul gave only the Sabbath day to the ministry of the Word because he had to work manually to support himself the rest of the week.

But when Silas and Timothy came from Macedonia, they came with an offering from those Christians who were poorer than poor but begged for the privilege of giving and sent an offering down to the Apostle Paul in Corinth so that freed from the necessity of manual labor he could give seven days a week to the preaching of the Word of God. In other words, tent making was a temporary expedient until the Lord's people provided the necessary support to release God's servant for full-time ministry in Corinth. So who were the evangelists? Paul, Aquila and Priscilla, Silas and Timothy, the Macedonians from northeastern Greece, and there was one more who was involved in that work, and his name is the Lord Jesus Christ.

He is the evangelist par excellence, and the others are simply fellow laborers together with him. And one night he appears to Paul in a vision, and Paul not only beholds the vision but hears the voice of the Lord Jesus who has commissioned him, and the Lord Jesus puts new heart into his servant, and the Lord Jesus assures him that any attack that will come against him will not demolish him but will only enhance his witness to Jesus Christ under pressure, and the Lord says that he will stand by him. The Lord of the Great Commission continues to be faithful, though I am with you always even unto the end of the age.

I have yet many people in this town who need to come to a saving knowledge of the gospel. Stand firm, for I stand with you. The Lord Jesus is the supreme evangelist, making it possible for his co-workers to do their work in the world.

And so Paul abode there a year and six months. A Corinthian ministry nowadays is defined as an 18-month ministry, and that is what Paul rendered in that case. So the evangelists, Paul, Aquila and Priscilla, Silas and Timothy, those unknown saints in Macedonia who provided necessary support at a critical point, and the Lord Jesus who stands by his servants when they stand for him.

Now if they were the evangelists, who were the evangelized? To whom was the gospel brought? Well it was brought to two groups of people. First a group in the synagogue, and there you would find an audience predominantly made up of Jewish people who believed the scriptures of the Old Testament, who looked forward to the coming of the Messiah, who were still waiting for the Savior to appear. And Paul told them that the Savior indeed had already come, and there all that remained for them to do was to believe in him and obey him.

But Paul's ministry went beyond the synagogue. The evangelized included not only devout Jews who were looking for the Messiah but hadn't yet found him, the work of evangelization included the city of Corinth, for we read about many Corinthians being exposed to the gospel word. What do we know about Corinth? It was destroyed by the Romans in 146 BC.

A hundred years later, Julius Caesar got a works program going and they rebuilt Corinth brand-new. Because of its location, it was a great center for communications and commerce. You take the Balkan Peninsula of Europe and you come southward, southward, southward, until there is only a little narrow neck of land four miles wide joining the southern part of Greece with the northern part of the country and with the Balkan Peninsula of Europe.

All the commerce that went north and south had to cross that isthmus. All the shipping that was going east and west or west and east would think twice about going all the way around the Grecian Peninsula, 200 miles of dangerous journey with treacherous waters and sharp rock, and they would land their ship on one side of this narrow neck of land, take the cargo off, put the cargo and the ship on rollers to the other side or portage it if it were a smaller boat, and then set sail again, so that in a total of 20 miles they had avoided a trip of over 200 miles and that made a lot of business sense to these men. It was a center of government as well as commerce and communications.

It was a center for entertainment. You had boxing and wrestling and chariot races and gladiatorial combat. You can imagine yourself walking down Socrates Square or Plato Plaza or Demosthenes Drive or Zeus Boulevard or Neptune Beach, and then if you went up to Corinth Heights, there you would notice a gleaming temple served by a thousand priestesses of the fertility cult, and when the sun would set, these thousand priestesses in the temple of Aphrodite, from which we derive our word aphrodisiac, would make their way down from Corinth Heights to the city and turn into a thousand prostitutes, catering and pandering to the lusts of sailors and businessmen and government officials in the city of Corinth.

You can imagine the prevalence of venereal disease in that kind of super promiscuous situation. Now I'm sure that the Corinthians have never heard of the five points of Calvinism, the first of which is total depravity. They might not have believed in it, but they certainly practiced it, and if you wanted to describe a debauched lifestyle of drunkenness compounded with blatant immorality, you would say that so-and-so was Corinthianizing.

It became proverbial in that day. The evangelists and the evangelized. Jews in the synagogue, pagans in the city.

Now what about the evangel? What about the message that the evangelists addressed to those whom they sought to evangelize? That message is described in a variety of terms in the passage that we read this evening. In verse 11, the message, the evangel, the good news, is described as the Word of God. And earlier in this passage, in verse 5, the essence of the message is that Jesus is the Christ, that Jesus is the Messiah, that Jesus is the one anointed by God to be the infallible prophet who speaks the truth and dispels our ignorance, that he is the merciful priest who gives his life as a sacrifice for sin on the altar of the cross and ever lives to make intercession for his people, that Jesus is anointed to be the righteous King who brings in peace and defeats our last enemy, which is death.

The Word of God, in which we find Jesus presented as our prophet, priest, and king, that is the heart of the evangel which the evangelists presented. Now we have to learn to associate the epistles of the New Testament with the historical statements in the book of the Acts of the Apostles, and from the epistles we

get a much clearer and fuller idea of what it was that Paul preached in Corinth. For example, in 1st Corinthians 15, the Apostle Paul says, looking back over his shoulder, I want to remind you of the gospel that I preached to you, the gospel which incidentally you received and on which you took your stand.

The word that I preached to you was this, that as a matter of first importance you should understand that Christ died, that he died for our sins, fulfilling the prophecies of the Old Testament scriptures, that he was buried to show that he had truly died and not merely swooned upon the cross, and that the third day he was raised from the dead just as the scriptures had predicted, and that he was seen. That was the content of the message. So from 1st Corinthians 15, where Paul recollects what he preached when he evangelized Corinth, we can put content into what we find in Acts 18.

More than that, when we look at 1st Corinthians 2 chapter 2 and verse 2, Paul narrows the focus even more. He says, I not only preached that Christ died for our sin, I not only preached that he was buried, I not only preached that he was raised from the dead, I not only preached that he was seen, but above all I was determined to know nothing among you save Jesus Christ, under this one particular aspect, Christ crucified. That was the heart of the message.

Not merely that Christ was born, or that Christ performed miracles, or that he gave wonderful teachings, but that Christ died, and that in dying he paid the penalty for our sin. That was the crux of the matter. That was the heart of the gospel.

That is what he preached when he went to Corinth, the death of Jesus Christ, bearing in his own body the punishment of our sins on that accursed tree. That was the heart of the gospel, and that is what he preached. And that is what he applied to the Corinthian Christians who were still being affected and even infected by their pagan environment even after their conversion.

For he reminded the Christians of Corinth in 1st Corinthians chapter 6 that their bodies were meant to be the temples of the Holy Spirit. He reminded them in 1st Corinthians 6 that they no longer belonged to themselves to dispose of their bodies in any way that they wished, for they had been bought with a price, and the price that had been paid for their liberation from the penalty and power of sin was the precious blood of Jesus Christ, lamb without blemish and without spot. So Paul preached the gospel, a gospel that had to do with Jesus, a gospel that had to do with the death and resurrection of Jesus, a gospel that zeroed in on the sacrifice of Jesus at Calvary, a gospel that spoke of nothing but Jesus Christ and him crucified, applying to the needs of the Corinthians the sufficiency of the sacrifice of the Savior.

Did it have an impact on the people of Corinth? We know that some resisted, they rebelled, they ridiculed the message, they closed their ears and bolted their hearts against it, and they remained lost in their sins. To those who are perishing, said Paul in 1st Corinthians 1, the gospel is foolishness and they will die in their sin. But then there were others who having heard the Word of God, who having listened to the message about Jesus Christ, who having learned of his death and resurrection, who having been led by the hand of the Apostle to the foot of the cross to look up into the eyes of a Savior, sacrificed for their sin, there were those who heard and who believed and who were baptized.

Years later, the Apostle Paul was going to write to these same Corinthians and he was going to give them these words, Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived, no matter how permissive and promiscuous your generation may be. Neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor male prostitutes, nor homosexual offenders, nor thieves, nor greedy, nor drunkards, nor slanderers, nor swindlers, will inherit the kingdom of God. But then the note of grace, but

you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.

That, says Paul, is what some of you were. But now a tremendous change has come about by the grace of God. Polluted? You have been washed.

Washed as the Salvation Army hymn puts it, washed in the blood of the Lamb. Washed and made clean by the blood of Jesus Christ which cleanses us from all sin. See how he evangelized them with the evangel that suited their situation.

That stain and guilt can be washed away when Jesus takes it upon himself and pays the penalty in our place. That, says Paul, is what some of you were. But now there's a tremendous change.

Night has turned to day. Impurity has turned to righteousness. From the kingdom of darkness you have been brought into the kingdom of light.

You have been washed. You have been justified, that is, you've been acquitted of all charges because he was willing to be condemned in your place. You have been sanctified because this Jesus has put his Spirit into your heart to make you less and less like your corrupt contemporaries and more and more like himself.

How will the cities of our post-christian civilization in North America be evangelized? By telling men and women that they are rotten to the core? They know that as well as we do. Rather we evangelize by introducing them to a Christ who cares, who cares so much that he is willing to take upon himself the crushing load of guilt and in exchange to give a life that is new and fresh and clean and forgiven, empty of what was old to be filled with the promise and the presence of his sanctifying Spirit. Therefore may we be determined to know nothing but Jesus Christ and him crucified.

Let us pray. Lord we thank you for the evangel of hope, for the word of grace, for the promise of pardon, for the offer of newness of life. Grant, O God, that we may ever uphold and exalt Jesus Christ, our Savior and the Savior of all who with penitent hearts will turn to him and believe the good news.

We ask it in our Savior's dear name. Amen.

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