

Becoming Effective Witnesses

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WHAT IS THE GOSPEL? (AND, WHY SHOULD I EVANGELIZE?)

Acts 10: 23—48

By Richard Reiter

“For Christ’s love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all that those who live should live no longer for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.”

2 Corinthians 5:14—15

“To keep the good news to ourselves would be in effect to repudiate its validity.”

Robert E. Coleman

AIM OF THE STUDY

- To understand what the gospel is, who it is for, and who is responsible for broadcasting it.

KEY VERSES

“...how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how He went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil because God was with Him. We are witnesses of everything He did both in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed Him by hanging Him on a tree, but God raised Him from the dead on the third day and caused Him to be seen...by us who ate and drank with Him after He rose from the dead. And He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that this is the One whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about Him that everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins through His name.”

Acts 10: 38-43

PREPARATION

Read over the notes on “**how to teach the Bible in small group**” and “**some practical suggestions for leading a small group discussion**” in Vineyard Church of Columbus’ *Small Group Leadership Training Manual*. Before you read over the Scripture, pray that God would give you direction for leading your group and teach you something relevant. Then read through the passage and the Bible study below. **You will need to go over the questions and choose which ones you want to emphasize and which you could eliminate if your time is limited.** Note that the application questions are marked with an asterisk (*). Rather than leaving these to the end of the study, ask one or two as you work through the passage so people are being confronted by Scripture’s truths and applying them to their own lives. If you find you are falling behind schedule and need to move ahead, you could summarize some of the passage and then go to the final questions.

These studies contain more background material and information on the passages than any group will cover in a meeting. The authors are providing this for the leaders’ benefit—to help reduce your study and preparation time; to help resource you for possible questions group members may raise; and to clarify some gray areas of doctrine that may be in your mind as you prepare. Obviously we cannot exhaust any one subject in a document like this, so you may want to do further reading and discuss doctrine with your pastor. We highly recommend *The New Bible Dictionary* or *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* as excellent resources for study.

OPENERS

Have you ever watched the classic Christmas movie, *It’s a Wonderful Life*? If so, then you know what the message of the movie is. It’s bold and clear at the end when George Bailey (played by Jimmy Stewart) and his family are standing beside the Christmas tree. George opens the cover of a book and reads this inscription, “He is no failure who has friends.”

Throughout the movie, viewers watch George Bailey struggle with his search for significance. Although he had dreams of travel, there was the reality of running the Savings and Loan Company. George had many feelings of worthlessness and signs of apparent failure. Even though he had made a significant difference in many people's lives, he hadn't seen that and contemplated ending his own. Amidst beautiful episodes and worthwhile content, there is only one big idea, one big message. Director Frank Capra wanted everyone to understand, "He is no failure who has friends." Likewise, anyone wanting to communicate clearly through music, the visual arts, or writing must keep the spotlight, so to speak, on one central theme.

If you were to make a movie about your life, what would the big message be?

Allow any group members to share who want to, but remind them that this message needs to be simple and direct. Of course, some will give funny replies off the top of their heads, and that's ok. Don't linger or plead for another answer. Be prepared with your own to get folks thinking on a more serious level. E.g., "My big message would be: 'No God, no peace. Know God, know peace'; or, 'Letting Go and Learning to Trust'; 'My Utmost for His Honor'; 'Lost and Found,' etc.

As we examine the Bible, we will discover that God has one big message, too. He wants to unite all people and all of creation harmoniously with Himself under His benevolent rule. Because all of His creation has been spoiled by sin, and all humans are in rebellion against Him, He sent His Son Jesus to free us from the enemy camp and transform us into children who willingly carry out His plans. We may call this the good news, the gospel message, or the news of the kingdom of God. But whatever label we give it, it is God's one big idea, one big concern, one big message for people all over this world.

Pray together that your group will listen to the Spirit and be changed as He shines light on this Scripture.

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

The book of Acts has been given a variety of titles: The Acts of the Apostles, The Acts of the Holy Spirit, or Acts. Whichever title you choose, one fact remains: this book gives an overview of God saving Jews and Gentiles and forming them into the universal body of Christ, The Church. In this process, we see the ministry of Peter to the Jews and Paul to the Gentiles. Luke, a physician, who spent time traveling with Paul, wrote Acts. He also wrote the fourth book of the New Testament, The Gospel According to Luke.

STUDY THE PASSAGE: Acts 10:34-44

God's big idea is to fulfill the plan Jesus spoke to the disciples about in Acts 1:8: "...and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." The church had been growing rapidly in Jerusalem. When persecution began,

believers scattered into Judea and Samaria (8:1). Philip carried the gospel to Samaria and then led the first African Jew, an Ethiopian, to Christ (8:26-38).

We are about to read how the first non-Jew came to hear and believe the gospel. This may not seem startling to us because we picture Christianity embracing all races and cultures. But at its beginning, the church was membered only by Jews. This idea of welcoming all people was a huge revelation for the Jews to grasp. It had been foretold in their Scriptures, but it required such a radical shift in thinking that it took decades to sink in. Prior to this passage, God had prepared a God-fearing Roman centurion named Cornelius to hear about Jesus. It took further work to convince the disciple, Peter, to take the message to Cornelius and his family. God spoke to Peter three times trying to convey that He had abolished the Jewish laws of keeping away from what was considered “unclean”. While Peter was still contemplating the heavenly message, the three men Cornelius had sent arrived asking for Peter. The Holy Spirit told Peter to go with them, and obediently, but still a bit bewildered, he invited the men to spend the night and left the next day.

1. Read Acts 10:23-33, as 23-29 and 30-33.

Who traveled with Peter to Caesarea? Why might he want to take them along?

Peter had been staying in Joppa, the main seaport on the Mediterranean for Judea. It was thirty miles south of Caesarea, the Roman army headquarters where Cornelius lived. Since this visit was setting a new precedent of taking the gospel to non-Jews, Peter took six other believers with him. Did he think he needed their help, prayer support, or input on how the work should proceed? Did the Holy Spirit nudge him to invite these men? We do know that later they served as witnesses to the mother church in Jerusalem of what God had done among the Gentiles. (See Acts 11:1-18.)

2. Who awaited their arrival? What do we know about them from verses 1-7?

Cornelius, his relatives and some friends were waiting for Peter’s arrival. Cornelius was a Roman centurion, who commanded about 100 men (v. 1). Cornelius and his family are called devout (v. 1), which means they were respectful of God. Even a soldier who served under him was called devout (v. 7). Since Roman families were patriarchal, Cornelius was both very influential and respected by his household. Although Cornelius was not a full convert to Judaism (called a “proselyte”), he feared God (v. 2) and gave generously to those in need (v. 1). He must have recognized that he needed God’s favor or at least needed to depend on God, because he prayed regularly to Him (v. 3). This word, *Theo*, found in vv. 2-4, is the word used by the New Testament and by heathen people for the true God. Cornelius seemed concerned for his family and friends’ welfare and had called his relatives and close friends to come hear what this man of God would say.

***Optional: Does this mean a person may fear God without truly knowing Him?**

Yes, God has made all of us with a conscience that convicts us of what is right and wrong (Rom. 2:14-15). We may feel true guilt when we violate God's moral laws for our world. Also, many people have a family or cultural background with some spiritual or moral component. Some of us have been taught to be accountable for our actions and may experience a general sense of doom when we violate even our own values. Most people sense some shame or guilt when their actions run against the norm no matter how lax those values are. Some of your group members may have family, friends or co-workers who demonstrate the fear of God or show signs of feeling guilty, in which case you could discuss later how to tie in the unbelievers' comments with the gospel.

***What would you say to someone who hoped they would receive eternal life because they did good deeds for others?**

Use this question to clarify that we are saved only by God's grace. Affirm that we can admire the good others do and see the image of God that resides in them especially when they reflect His compassion. (His nature is also seen in their creativity, generosity, communication, love of truth, justice, beauty, etc.) However, we need to make it clear that the key to eternal life and relationship with God is not something we earn by good deeds. None of us can out give God or make up for our shortcomings by helping others. Our misdeeds not only outweigh all our good ones, but our very nature is to reject God and run our lives on our own terms. For example, we would prefer to decide whom we will help, when we can help them, and how far we'll go in helping them! We like control and don't want to surrender it to anyone else. Because of our rebellion against God's rule, we need to be reconciled to Him. Our independence is an affront to Holy God because we truly can't run our lives or the universe.

Since He is holy and just, He cannot pretend that we haven't rebelled or sinned against Him. He demands payment for our sin. (We wouldn't want to hear Him say to someone who has been tortured that his/her torturer didn't really do any harm. We wouldn't want someone who raped another or killed a family member to get off without punishment because God was going to look the other way.) So, we need to be forgiven and reconciled, and the penalty for our sin needs to be paid for—on God's terms, not our own.

3. What happened when Peter arrived?

After two days of travel, Peter arrived at Cornelius' home. Cornelius, not a mere servant, met him and fell at Peter's feet in reverence. Peter did not want to be mistaken for another heavenly messenger, a god, or someone supremely superior, so he made Cornelius get up saying, "I am only a man myself."

4. What indicates that Peter is also learning some things for the first time?

He reminds these people that Jewish law doesn't allow for Jews to have contact with Gentiles, even though he had traveled two days with them and now is

entering a Gentile home! (It may have been permissible to house the Gentile visitors overnight since they were strangers, and God expected His people to be kind to aliens in their midst.) In verse 28, he says, “But God showed me...” which meant what he had followed as a Jew was changing. This is a huge shift, and Peter is still trying to understand what God is doing (v. 34). Remember, Peter was a fisherman in Galilee (Luke 5:10), became a disciple (John 1:41-42), denied his master (Mark 14:66-72), witnessed the resurrection (John 20:3-9), and was restored to Jesus. Now he served as an apostle and leader of the new church (Acts 2:14; 1 Pet. 1:1; 1 Pet. 5:1). But this whole time he had lived and associated with the Jewish people.

5. How did Cornelius summarize why he had sent for Peter?

An angel had come during his prayer time, announced that God had heard his prayers, and He was pleased with his generosity to the poor. The angel gave specific details about how to contact Peter (whom he was to bring back to his hometown). He then told Peter that they were waiting to hear all that the Lord had told him to say to them—recognizing that God was present with them.

6. Read Acts 10:34-38, 39-43, and 44-48.

How did Peter reply to Cornelius’ invitation to speak what God had commanded?

Before relating the facts of the gospel, Peter starts with what is radically new to him. He is realizing that God is no respecter of people. God is impartial and is not playing favorites. He does not favor Jews over Greeks, Anglos over Africans, or Native Americans over Asians. In the vision God gave him before Cornelius’ representatives had arrived, Peter heard, “Don’t call anything impure that God has made clean” (v. 15). In v. 35 Peter says, “God is no respecter of persons *but...*” *But* is a word used to make a contrast, and Peter is contrasting “show favoritism” with “accepts” (see information on that word below). Peter is being gripped by the truth that God intends “every nation” to hear the gospel (Matt. 28:19). The Greek word *ethnos* does not refer to an area of land but rather a race of people belonging to and living together. That’s why modern missions focuses more on people groups than countries since many languages and cultures exist within common borders.

***Optional: Is Peter saying unbelievers who fear God and do things that are right will be saved and have eternal life?**

Again, this is a clarification question, and if you are short on time, you could simply make this point and go on. No, Peter is not denying the gospel and that is why he goes on in verses 36 and following to explain the message about Jesus. Salvation and eternal life come only through faith in Jesus Christ (Acts 4:12). The Greek word translated “accepted” is *dektos*, which when used to speak of humans translates into “being well liked or valued.” It does not mean one has a saving relationship with God. When unbelievers fear God, they accept the

authority of God for their standard of living as opposed to living as a lawless person. God saw Cornelius' heart and the evidence of his good deeds and responded by sending someone who could share the way of salvation with him.

7. What does Peter say is God's message? To whom did God send it?

The message, Peter says, is the good news of peace through Jesus Christ who is Lord of all. Your group members may miss this and jump down to the facts about Jesus' life beginning in verse 37. But Peter was not just retelling history. He wanted his hearers to understand that peace with God was available through faith in Jesus, the one anointed by God (Hebrew for "anointed one": "Messiah"; Greek: "Christ"). Peace with God can refer to two things: both the absence of hostility in our relationship with God when we are reconciled by His Son's payment for our sin; and peace can point to the blessings of being favored by God. It is the opposite of war and dissension, or rebellion. It is also the Old Testament equivalent of *shalom*—the health, wholeness, welfare and prosperity God wants His people to enjoy. The message came first to the Jews, to whom God had promised a Messiah who would establish His kingdom on earth (Dan. 7:13-14; Is. 9 & 11). But even as Peter is explaining this to a group of non-Jews, the kingdom is coming to the Gentiles as well.

8. What facts did Peter relate about Jesus?

Beginning with Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist, Peter mentions how God anointed Jesus with the Holy Spirit and power. His anointing refers back to a ceremony when a high priest or king was set apart for the sacred duties God called him to. Rather than a human representative pouring holy oil, God Himself poured His Spirit and power on Jesus. Giving Jesus this power meant He had the ability to carry out the works of God's kingdom. Peter summarizes these as "doing good and healing." This means He continuously acted as a benefactor to the people He met, and restored them to health. You can see Jesus doing the works of the Messiah summarized in Luke 7:18-22.

***Optional: Who or what is behind people that are sick, mistreated or exploited?**

Asking this question may help your group members see the world we live in as a battleground between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan. When we see people sick or mistreated, we are looking at places where the kingdom of this world and the prince of this world are wielding influence. But the good news is that Jesus came to break the devil's power and bring His Father's salvation, rule and blessings (1 John 3:8; John 10:10). The devil, *diabolou*, is the one who falsely accuses and divides people, and when we see an absence of peace in relationships, we know he is behind that, too. Even when other human beings are used as puppet tyrants, dictators, abusers, etc., we should not lose sight of the true strategist: the devil. Paul tells us that our battle is not against flesh and blood but against evil spiritual forces (Eph. 6:12). Scripture does state that

sometimes God sends evil as punishment or judgment, but since Jesus has come, we can usually assume that His will is to oppose evil in every form.

***Optional: How should followers of Jesus respond to such conditions?**

Concerned people may (and in many cases should) boycott corporations, organizations, and nations that function and profit through exploitation of human beings. But we must use even greater energy to genuinely proclaim the gospel of peace through Jesus, as well as do battle against evil through prayer. As people who follow Jesus, we should do what Jesus did: do good to others; be merciful benefactors; heal the sick; and pray for the oppressed. As we match our words with the kind of compassionate works He performed, our witness to the needy in the world will gain credibility and draw seekers. This question is an important one but may lead you into a brainstorming session. If someone in the group is functioning to co-ordinate mercy ministry or has a heart for this, you could get together to pray and plan some outreach. Then your group may want to participate in some evangelism with a service component on a regular basis.

9. How does Peter describe himself and fellow Christians?

Peter says, without any shame, that they are witnesses of Jesus. A witness is someone who has information about something and is able to confirm it. In the New Testament, the word is specifically used for people who announce the facts of the gospel. Peter and others saw Jesus taken away by the Jewish leaders, and suspended on a cross by the Romans until He died. But, they also saw Jesus raised from the dead, and they later realized God was responsible for all this. Then they saw Jesus when He made Himself visible after His resurrection from the dead. They ate and drank with Him, proving that He still inhabited a body rather than being a ghost.

10. What did Peter say Jesus told them to do after He was raised?

Here, Peter says that Jesus commanded them to testify that God appointed Him to judge the living and dead. We might expect Peter to describe Jesus and His commission to the disciples a bit differently since Jesus' message was not primarily about His right to judge all people in the future. But after His resurrection and before His return to heaven, Jesus told His followers to make disciples of all people until the end of the age, or end of human history (Matt. 28:18-20). Thus, when Jesus returns at the close of human history, and serves as judge over all, His hope is to have many who greet Him already knowing Him as their Savior and Lord.

Paul, in 2 Cor. 5:10-11, says something similar to Peter: "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done in the body, whether good or bad. Since, then, we know what it is to fear the Lord, we try to persuade men...." For Peter, the resurrection proved Jesus is Almighty God, and that Jesus will return one day to judge all people.

Thus, now is the time to be saved so that we can begin that eternal relationship and are ready for His inevitable return.

***Optional: Who witnessed to Jesus even before He lived on earth? What did they say?**

You won't have time to do an entire Old Testament summary during one Bible study, so you will have to determine how much time to spend on this point. For relatively new believers, or evangelistically reluctant ones, you want to move on to the end where the emphasis is on **our witnessing** to Jesus. Peter refers to the prophets who testified to Jesus before He lived among His people on earth. He points out that they too had the same message of salvation through believing in Jesus' name and receiving forgiveness of sins. To believe means to be authentically trusting in and trusting themselves to the power and nearness of God through Jesus Christ. That person who believes has been so thoroughly convinced of the existence and revelation of God in Jesus Christ that they receive something. Sin refers to all our offenses against God. It's missing the purpose of living by loving anything or anyone more than God. The Bible calls this idolatry. The Greek indicates that people who sin are captive to offending God; Paul says without Christ, we are slaves to sin (Rom. 6:17).

Peter is establishing that he is not bringing a word that had never been heard before. All these prophets spoke under the influence of God. He consistently forgave His people who humbly looked to Him for mercy. The animal sacrifices required by His law demonstrated that without the shedding of blood/paying with a life, there would be no forgiveness of sin (Lev. 17:11, Heb. 9:22). Heb. 10:1-4 tells us that these sacrifices did not actually take away true moral guilt. These all pointed to the time when God would send His Son to pay with His perfect life and pour out His holy blood. Thus the salvation message was consistent in the Old Testament presented in the law and by the prophets. They exhorted and reproved God's people and the nations. Occasionally, they foretold future events. While they were spokesmen for God, they also were pointing to Jesus. Remarkable! Every prophet of God from 8,000 B.C. to AD 60 solemnly confirmed the identity and facts of Jesus Christ's life, death and resurrection. Your small group may want to look at these at a later time especially since tracing the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies is one evangelistic tool to help convince people that Jesus is who He claimed to be.

11. As Peter continues speaking in verse 44, what happens?

The Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit, came upon those listening. Since God's Spirit resides in every believer (Rom. 8:11), this was a sure sign of the Gentiles' conversion. So, Peter's audience became people who believed in Jesus not simply as a "good person who lived in Judea," but believed by trusting in Him for salvation. By placing His Spirit in us, God has set apart and anointed each disciple for certain sacred duties. This anointing of God, through the Holy Spirit, now set apart Cornelius and the others to be viable witnesses, too.

12. Why was it startling for believing Jews to see the Spirit of God coming upon people of another race?

Again, even while he is preaching Christ in obedience to the Holy Spirit's prompting, Peter and the men from Joppa had never seen anyone except Jews receive the gospel. And, the Lord breaks in with a supernatural demonstration of His working in Cornelius' crowd just as He did on the day of Pentecost so that Peter and company would have tangible evidence of His approval of these converts. Peter recognizes that "they have received the Holy Spirit just as we have" and thus baptizes them into the community of believers as an outward sign of dying to their old life and spiritual rebirth.

You don't need to have a lengthy discussion about spiritual gifts or praying in tongues right now. That would take the focus off the primary message of our need to evangelize all peoples. However, if members of your group raise questions about this text, you could refer back to Acts 2 where praising God and speaking in tongues are the exact same behaviors the first followers of Christ were compelled to do when the Holy Spirit was given at Pentecost, the Feast of First Fruits. Here, Cornelius and his companions symbolize the first fruits of the mission to the Gentiles. You can also state that Vineyard does not teach that speaking in tongues must accompany the initiation into the Body of Christ or the initial infilling of the Holy Spirit.

APPLYING THE TEXT

***If God provided witnesses before Jesus came to earth, and God provided witnesses during Jesus' earthly existence, it's logical that God provided witnesses after Jesus' return to heaven. Who are these witnesses now?**

Along with Peter and the other disciples, and the faithful down through two millennia, we and other believers now serve as witnesses to Jesus and His good news. Witnesses are key in proclaiming Jesus' identity to any generation of any ethnicity. God's Spirit and His Word are sufficient to reveal Jesus, but God has also chosen humans to carry on this mission.

***Who did God use in your life as a witness to Jesus Christ? To whom have you passed on the gospel?**

***How do you feel about relating the gospel to people ethnically, economically, or culturally different than yourself?**

WRAPPING IT UP

God doesn't respect any national or ethnic people over others. He has sent His message of peace through Jesus Christ to everyone. This good news must have witnesses who are enabled or positioned for carrying out their solemn sacred duties. In every generation God

has anointed such people with His Holy Spirit to carry this message and entrust it to others. Being witnesses of His gospel is our responsibility in loving God and the people of the world He has made.

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