

Message #49

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Acts

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HOW TO SHARE THE GOSPEL ACTS 26

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

The Nancy Guthrie disappearance case has dominated the news this past week. Federal and local investigators have been largely frustrated in their efforts to find this 84 year old woman. Late last week the FBI doubled their reward to \$100,000 for information leading to the solution of this case. What is desperately needed is someone who is a witness to what happened to this woman. Fortunately ring camera video was discovered which provided some kind of witness to a perpetrator who was apparently involved. Other kinds of evidence are also being examined--- gloves, DNA remnants, other videos, cell phones, and people who had recent contact with Nancy Guthrie.

The value of witness is foundational to the cause of Jesus Christ. In our study of the Book of Acts we have seen the author Luke develop his historical account around the command of Jesus (PROJECTOR ON--- ACTS 1:8) to His disciples in #1 v. 8: **“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”** At this stage of our study we have seen that Paul was a prime example of what a witness of Jesus should be and do and say.

It is obvious to us who study the Bible that Paul’s witness was extremely effective. Through his efforts the church spread beyond Judaism and beyond the land of Israel to reach Gentiles in Asia Minor and Europe. How did he have such an effective witness? There are many factors that contributed to his successful witness. In the passage before us this morning we are going to identify some of factors that made him successful in his verbal witness about Jesus Christ. Those of us who are serious about being effective witnesses for Christ can learn key lessons from Paul’s oral defense in #26.

I.

The first lesson has to do with BEING COURTEOUS TOWARD UNBELIEVERS. (I. BEING COURTEOUS TOWARD UNBELIEVERS) That is the subject of the first three verses of Acts 26. Paul, remember, is a prisoner in Caesarea, the capital of the Roman province of Judea. Paul was imprisoned in 58 AD after coming to Jerusalem with a financial gift from the mostly Gentile churches of Greece and Asia Minor for the famine-plagued Jewish Christians of Judea. In the temple Jews from Asia Minor stirred up a riot and almost killed Paul. The Romans intervened and, after they learned that Paul was a Roman citizen, ensured that he was given protection due to him as a Roman citizen. (JERUSALEM TO CAESAREA) They brought Paul to Caesarea. The Jewish leaders didn’t have much of a case against him. But the Roman governor Felix didn’t want to

alienate the Jewish leaders. So he simply kept him in prison in Caesarea. (ANCIENT CAESAREA)

Two years later Felix was recalled to Rome, and now Festus showed up to replace him. The Jews pressured Festus to have Paul brought to Jerusalem to answer charges against him. Paul was wary of having that happen. So he exercised his right as a Roman citizen to appeal this case to Rome. Governor Festus had no choice under Roman law but to go along with this. But he still wasn't clear about what charges should be filed against him.

So when King Agrippa, the great grandson of Herod the Great, and his sister Bernice showed up, the governor looked for some help from them. Agrippa was ruler of a small kingdom to the north of Judea. The Romans had also given him authority over the temple in Jerusalem and the right to choose the high priest. Agrippa, though ethnically Edomite, had a reputation for being knowledgeable in Jewish law. Festus then asked Agrippa to help him in understanding why the Jews were so upset with Paul so that he could send a report that made sense along with Paul to Rome. (PROJECTOR OFF)

As we saw last week this meeting with Paul turned into a big social occasion. All of the leading citizens of Caesarea and Roman administrators military officers showed up to listen to this Christian prisoner. Given that this was not a formal legal hearing, Festus let Agrippa run the meeting. Thus we read in v. 1, **“So Agrippa said to Paul, ‘You have permission to speak for yourself.’ Then Paul stretched out his hand and made his defense.”** The king of the Jews was about to hear about the true King of the Jews.

Governor Festus was wanting Paul to talk so that Agrippa could help him figure out what charges should be included in his report to Rome about this case. Paul had a different interest. His focus in this talk is the defense and explanation of the gospel of Christ. The primary focus of his attention is King Agrippa, who is a practicing Jew and has considerable knowledge about the Hebrew Bible. So Paul is going to have a big emphasis on Jewish teaching and the Bible in what he says.

He begins in vv. 2 & 3: **“I consider myself fortunate that it is before you, King Agrippa, I am going to make my defense today against all the accusations of the Jews, 3 especially because you are familiar with all the customs and controversies of the Jews. Therefore I beg you to listen to me patiently.”**

We learned last week that Agrippa was not an especially godly man. He may have been an expert in Jewish law, and he may have been a practicing Jew. But Bernice, who was with him, was not his wife. She was his full-blooded sister. The gossip was that they had an incestuous relationship. We also know that both of them liked to play power games and relished and pursued material wealth.

The Old Testament prophets often came out strong against people like this. John the Baptist ripped into one of Agrippa's earlier relatives who married his sister-in-law. John

was beheaded largely because of his criticism of that relationship. Paul here is courteous and respectful toward Agrippa.

Part of the reason is that Paul realized that he was part of a new covenant community. In Old Testament times the well-being of the Jews was dependent upon how all of their countrymen did spiritually. Under the Mosaic Law God's treatment of the nation as a whole depended to a great extent upon the behavior of the nation's leader. Now God was operating with a new arrangement. The death of Christ had established a new covenant. God's instrument of blessing upon the earth became the church, rather than Israel.

So Paul was more courteous to those who were outside of this covenant community. In his New Testament letters we see that Paul could be very harsh toward those individuals who claimed to be part of the church but who acted very unchristianly. Toward those outside of the church Paul said that he would do whatever was necessary to win them to Christ. He said that he became all things to all people. Thus he was courteous toward unbelievers.

It is hard to win people to Christ if we don't show care and compassion toward them. I once had a friend Adam who had a work acquaintance who would occasionally call him in the middle of the night when he was under the influence. Besides having his sleep disturbed, Adam had been raised with an alcoholic father. So he had an extra negative emotional reaction toward alcoholics. Yet he was patient with this guy and would tell him that he needed to become a Christian. Adam almost wrote this guy off. But one night he said that he would believe in Jesus. Sure enough, his life began to change.

We Christians are not obligated to condone the sin of unbelievers. But we can respect even the greatest of sinners as human beings who bear the image of God, and we can treat them with respect. This Agrippa was a religious hypocrite. But Paul treated him respectfully.

II.

The second lesson of this passage has to do with SHARING OUR CONVERSION STORY. (PROJECTOR ON--- II. SHARING OUR CONVERSION STORY) This is the third account that we have in the Book of Acts about the conversion of the Apostle Paul. In our study of the account in #22 I talked about lessons there that we can learn about sharing the gospel. I stressed the value of sharing our own spiritual testimony. So I won't go into quite so much detail and application in regard to that again. But we do have to notice here that Paul is once more sharing his story. Jesus told His followers to be witnesses. If our job as a witness is simply to explain what we have seen and experienced, then it would seem that sharing our testimony is going to have a role in that.

In vv. 4 & 5 Paul starts in, **“My manner of life from my youth, spent from the beginning among my own nation and in Jerusalem, is known by all the Jews. 5**

They have known for a long time, if they are willing to testify, that according to the strictest party of our religion I have lived as a Pharisee.”

The Jewish leaders had been trying to distance these Christians from Judaism. They had argued before the Romans that this Jesus movement was a sect separate from Judaism. Paul had argued, and is arguing now, that the gospel is thoroughly Jewish. In fact it is the fulfillment of the promises and hopes of the Hebrew Bible. Thus Paul is stressing his Pharisaic background. The Pharisees had much more influence among Jewish people than the Sadducees did. King Agrippa was probably more sympathetic to these Pharisaic views.

Two thousand years later Jewish leaders are still trying to distance themselves from Christians. A few years ago there was an article in the *NY Times Sunday Magazine* about Christian Jews. At one point Abraham Foxman, the national director of the Anti-Defamation League, was quoted as saying, **“Christians have been trying to make us disappear as Jews for 2,000 years. Now they’re trying a different method, which is for them to tell us that you can believe in Jesus and still be Jewish. It’s baloney, of course.”** This supposedly different method is the same method that Paul was using 2000 years ago.

Paul continues his story in vv. 6 & 7: **“And now I stand here on trial because of my hope in the promise made by God to our fathers, 7 to which our twelve tribes hope to attain, as they earnestly worship night and day. And for this hope I am accused by Jews, O king!”** What is this “hope of the promise”? It is the fulfillment of the Old Testament promises concerning an earthly messianic kingdom. In order for Old Testament saints to enjoy the fulfillment of these promises there must be a resurrection of the dead, which is a thoroughly Pharisaic doctrine.

Thus in v. 8 Paul asks, **“Why is it thought incredible by any of you that God raises the dead?”** It is hypocritical to hold to a belief in the resurrection of the dead and then to instantly rule out the possibility of a genuine case of such a resurrection. This instant rejection is what the Pharisees have done with the claim of Jesus’ resurrection.

Nevertheless Paul identifies with his accusers in vv. 9-11: **“I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things in opposing the name of Jesus of Nazareth. 10 And I did so in Jerusalem. I not only locked up many of the saints in prison after receiving authority from the chief priests, but when they were put to death I cast my vote against them. 11 And I punished them often in all the synagogues and tried to make them blaspheme, and in raging fury against them I persecuted them even to foreign cities.”**

Some have wondered if his statement about casting his vote with the chief priests to put Christians to death means that Paul had actually been a member of the Sanhedrin. That seems doubtful to me. If Paul had been a member of the Sanhedrin, he would have included that fact in his messages recorded in Acts. Luke also would have wanted his readers to know that. It seems more likely that Paul was saying that he agreed with the

decision of the Sanhedrin in their condemnation of Christians. He could truly understand the thinking of the Jews who were persecuting him now.

Paul then describes the Damascus road experience again in vv. 12-14: **“In this connection I journeyed to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests. 13 At midday, O king, I saw on the way a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, that shone around me and those who journeyed with me. 14 And when we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew language, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.’”**

The new bits of information not included in the previous accounts of Paul’s conversion are the facts that the Lord Jesus spoke to him in Aramaic and that the risen Christ told him that it was hard to kick against the goads. Goads were sticks that farmers plowing a field would use to keep an ox or other farm animal doing its job. Some have suggested that this statement indicates that Paul had been fighting a guilty conscience for his persecution of the Christians. But elsewhere Paul claimed that Paul had lived his life with a clear conscience. It seems more likely that the Lord was saying that it was tough to fight the plan of God. Paul was trying to stop the Christians. But churches were popping up everywhere, and it was tough to keep fighting against the sovereign working of God that was continually confronting Paul.

Paul finishes his description of what happened in vv. 15-18: **“And I said, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ And the Lord said, ‘I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. 16 But rise and stand upon your feet, for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and witness to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you, 17 delivering you from your people and from the Gentiles—to whom I am sending you 18 to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.’”**

We are reminded here about the reason that the resurrection was such a big deal to Paul. It was the appearance of the resurrected Christ that turned his life around. It was seeing the living, resurrected Christ that convinced Paul that he had been traveling down the wrong path and that he must henceforth identify with the cause of Christ.

Note also the rich theology that was included in v. 18 in the Lord’s commissioning of Paul to work for Him. Paul was to be a witness for Christ to unbelievers to turn them from darkness to light and from the dominion of Satan to the dominion of God. Before we come to Christ the Bible says that we are in a state of spiritual darkness and that we are actually ruled by Satan.

What is needed is the forgiveness of sins. This opening of the eyes produces not only forgiveness of sins, but it also means that we acquire an inheritance. Elsewhere we learn that this inheritance is related to the fact that at the moment of salvation we become part of God’s family. This state of sanctification, or being made holy, comes

about, the Lord indicated, as a result of church membership, right? No. Doing good works? No. Baptism? No. By faith in Christ. Paul quotes Jesus saying that we are **“sanctified by faith in Me.”**

III.

So Paul’s example shows us that we can be effective in sharing the gospel when we are being courteous toward unbelievers and when we are sharing our conversion story. Verses 19-21 also talk about the value of EXPLAINING BASIC DOCTRINE. (III. EXPLAINING BASIC DOCTRINE)

Verse 18 described basic Christian doctrine. But this verse appears in the context of the instructions that Jesus gave Paul. Now Paul describes the message that he preached to others. He says, **“Therefore, O King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, 20 but declared first to those in Damascus, then in Jerusalem and throughout all the region of Judea, and also to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds in keeping with their repentance. 21 For this reason the Jews seized me in the temple and tried to kill me.”**

In Paul’s preaching he talked about things like sin and forgiveness and sanctification and faith. Here he summarizes his doctrine around the concepts of repentance, turning to God, and performing deeds appropriate to repentance. The literal meaning of the original Greek word for “repent” means “to change one’s mind.” In the context of Christian theology it means to change one’s mind about sin and turn toward God. John the Baptist’s message, according to the gospels, was “Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand.” The death and resurrection of Christ meant that repentance involves turning from sin to Jesus Christ. For, as the Apostle John says, He is the visible manifestation of God. It was His death on the cross that paid the penalty for man’s sin. It is faith in Jesus and His sacrifice for us that enables us to receive the benefits of that sacrifice.

The point is that when we share the gospel, we have to explain some basic doctrine. We have to make sure that the unbelievers whom we are addressing have some basic understanding about sin and about Jesus and about the atonement and about the resurrection and about the meaning of saving faith. In our increasingly secular culture those religious terms aren’t as readily understood as they once were.

So, for example, we need to make sure that people understand when we talk about sin, we are not talking about simply making mistakes or failing to live up to our full potential or having offended other people. We need to communicate that sin involves violating the standards of a holy God who holds us accountable for all of our behavior.

We also need to explain that this salvation and forgiveness of sins is available simply on the basis of faith in Christ. The common misunderstanding is that we have to be good enough, or we have to earn God’s acceptance. The Bible says that anyone who believes in Jesus will receive the gift of eternal life. It was this gospel of grace freely available to even Gentiles that got the Jews so worked up and led to the riot in the temple in Jerusalem. Most of the Jews were selfish about their salvation. They were

prejudiced against the Gentiles and could not comprehend that people could be right with God apart from obedience to the Law of Moses. But this was the truth, and this was the basic doctrine that had to be explained.

IV.

Verses 22-23 also illustrate the importance of USING THE SCRIPTURES in our efforts to share the gospel. (IV. USING THE SCRIPTURES) Paul says, **“To this day I have had the help that comes from God, and so I stand here testifying both to small and great, saying nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would come to pass: 23 that the Christ must suffer and that, by being the first to rise from the dead, he would proclaim light both to our people and to the Gentiles.”**

The apostle was addressing King Agrippa, who professed to have faith in the God of the Hebrew Bible. So he turned to the Bible for support for his message. All that we have here is a summary of Paul’s message. Most likely Paul quoted some passages from the Bible that showed that the Messiah was to suffer and rise from the dead and bring light to the Gentiles as well as the Jews. He probably turned to Isaiah 53 (ISAIAH 53:4) and cited the passage that included vv. 4 & 5: **“Surely he has borne our griefs/ and carried our sorrows;/ yet we esteemed him stricken,/ smitten by God, and afflicted./ (ISAIAH 53:5) But he was pierced for our transgressions;/ he was crushed for our iniquities;/ upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace,/ and with his wounds we are healed.”**

To show that the Messiah would rise from the dead (PSALM 16:10) he probably quoted Psalm 16 v. 10: **“For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol,/ or let your holy one see corruption.”** To show that the news about the risen Messiah would be proclaimed to Gentiles as well as Jews Paul could have cited Isaiah 49:6 (ISAIAH 49:6): **“It is too light a thing that you should be my servant/ to raise up the tribes of Jacob/ and to bring back the preserved of Israel;/ I will make you as a light for the nations [Gentiles],/ that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”**

Jesus used the Bible in evangelism. Paul used the Bible in his evangelism. We need to use it also. In our secular culture we will encounter some people who reject the Bible and don’t want to hear us quote it. But we can still use it with people like that. We don’t have to tell them what we say is from the Bible. We looked at Paul’s visit to secular Athens several months ago and saw that in his preaching to this audience he didn’t recite many Bible verses. But he used Biblical concepts. He talked about Biblical ideas.

We can do that with secular people also. (HEBREWS 4:12) The Bible says in the fourth chapter of Hebrews, **“For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.”** Whether secular people believe it or not, there is truth and power in the Scriptures. We need to use them when we share the gospel.

V.

The last stage in sharing the gospel is EXTENDING THE INVITATION. (V. EXTENDING THE INVITATION) [I neglected to include this fifth point in the bulletin outline.] That is the subject of vv. 24-32. At this point in Paul's talk Governor Festus interrupted loudly and said, "**Paul, you are out of your mind; your great learning is driving you out of your mind.**" This idea of resurrection was ridiculous to the governor's Roman mind set. Resurrections just don't happen. Paul was obviously a learned man. But in Paul's ivory tower the apostle's feet were too far from the ground. He was not in touch with reality. Romans generally had a belief in the immortality of the soul, but they had no concept of a bodily resurrection after death.

The reaction of Festus was similar to the reaction of the average secularist today. The gospel story involves supernatural elements, and supernatural elements just do not happen.

But Agrippa was the main focus of Paul's evangelistic efforts. Thus we read in vv. 25 & 26, "**But Paul said, 'I am not out of my mind, most excellent Festus, but I am speaking true and rational words. 26 For the king knows about these things, and to him I speak boldly. For I am persuaded that none of these things has escaped his notice, for this has not been done in a corner.'**"

Keep in mind that there was a large audience that was present for this occasion. In #25 we learned that the audience included military commanders and leading citizens of Caesarea. They were mostly Roman by nationality or sympathy. Yet Paul is focusing almost entirely upon Agrippa. Why? Part of it is that the stated reason for the meeting was to have the king speak with and listen to Paul. But part of the reason may also have been that the Lord had told Paul previously that he was to have the opportunity to speak to kings. So the apostle may have felt a responsibility to focus his efforts on this occasion upon King Agrippa.

Notice Paul's words in v. 27: "**King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you believe.**" Paul is moving for a response now, isn't he? By the language that Paul uses it would seem that he senses some conviction in Agrippa that something of what Paul says is true.

According to v. 28 the king replies to Paul, "**In a short time would you persuade me to be a Christian?**" Some commentators think that Agrippa here is expressing some positivity about Paul's message. Most think that he is rejecting the gospel.

Perhaps the Holy Spirit was convincing him that he was hearing spiritual truth. But there were other pressures that he was feeling from the people around him and from his position as king. So he sought to get out of this situation.

When unbelievers are put on the spot by us evangelicals they often respond in similar ways: "I go to church. I believe in God and in Jesus. I'm a good person. I have been baptized. The issue, of course, is have you been born again? Have you really trusted in

Christ as your Savior? Do you have confidence that if you died today that you would go to heaven?

Paul didn't want to let Agrippa off the hook. In v. 29 he said, **"Whether short or long, I would to God that not only you but also all who hear me this day might become such as I am—except for these chains."** Can't you picture Paul raising up his shackled arms as he said that?

Imagine this scene. The most important people of Caesarea were gathered to listen to this guy. There were the king and his sister and the governor. There were military commanders and politicians and businessmen. These were wealthy and educated people. They were powerful people. Before them stood this prisoner in chains--- a man that the famous French skeptic Voltaire called "that ugly little Jew." But who was dominating this scene? And who was it who really had freedom? Who was it who really knew the meaning of power? Who was it who was acquainted with the greatest wealth? Who was it who had discovered the real meaning of life? I would suggest that it was "that ugly little Jew."

The Bible says that all of us who are Christians are ambassadors for Christ. In the opportunities that come our way to share the gospel we ambassadors need to remember that we have the authority of the King of kings behind us. When we sense that the Holy Spirit is at work in someone, as Paul may have sensed was the case with Agrippa, we need to extend the invitation. We need to encourage people to place their trust in Jesus Christ as their personal Savior.

King Agrippa in our story decided that it was time to go. Maybe he felt a bit too uncomfortable. **"Then the king rose, and the governor and Bernice and those who were sitting with them. 31 And when they had withdrawn, they said to one another, 'This man is doing nothing to deserve death or imprisonment.' 32 And Agrippa said to Festus, 'This man could have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar.'"** How did the author Luke know about these private conversations that occurred after the meeting with Paul? Paul wasn't there. Luke wasn't listening in. Someone in a high position had to have told Luke about it, or told someone else who told Luke. Perhaps one of these high officials became a Christian at some point. Though that person may not have been either Festus or King Agrippa, Luke is careful to note that the judgment of both the king and the governor was that Paul was innocent of any violation of Roman law.

In Paul's defense then of his ministry and message we see him using these elements of courtesy toward unbelievers, sharing his conversion story, explaining basic doctrine, using the Scriptures, and extending the invitation. As we close the message today we extend the invitation to you. It is possible that there are some here today who have never really begun a personal relationship with God through faith in Jesus Christ. Do you know if you died today that you would go to heaven? You can have that assurance. (1 JOHN 5:11-12) The Apostle John wrote in his first epistle, **"And this is the testimony, that God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. 12 Whoever**

has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life. (1 JOHN 5:13) I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life.”

We can know that we have eternal life now. It isn't a matter of waiting until we die to find out where we are going to spend eternity. If we have the Son of God in our life, we have eternal life. If you aren't sure that you have the Son of God in your life, you can change that right now. You simply need to recognize that you are a sinner in need of a Savior. You must acknowledge that Jesus was God who became man and who died on the cross to pay the penalty for your sin and who rose again. And you must put your trust in Jesus for your eternal destiny. John said that it is those who believe in the name of the Son of God who have this life. It is not being baptized. It is not doing good works. It is not belonging to a church---as good as all of those things may be. The Bible says that we become a Christian simply by placing out trust in Jesus Christ, receiving the gift of eternal life by faith alone.