

Leadership
July 23, 2017
Rhys Thomas

God's objective is to build a big family that will last. But who is to take the lead in this endeavor? My proposal is that it is us. But first, a little background.

Think about before creation. In Job 38, God mentioned that the angels shouted for joy when He laid the foundation of the earth, so they were around before people. Some angels stuck with the program, some did not. God could have made His big family from the good angels, but, apparently, that was not enough. After all, a sizeable percentage of them had already abandoned ship. People, with all the disasters they have caused for themselves, were still needed to reach God's objective.

What do we, the people, bring to the table? The simple answer is wrapped up in the one question at Judgment, "Faith or not?" More explicitly, faith expressing itself through love. That's our contribution to the eternal potluck. God thinks that a family will hold together indefinitely if everyone in the family trusts each other completely and cares about each other selflessly. Notice that flawless execution was not one of the criteria. Think about the part of your family that hangs together. My guess is that you could recall a time or two when each one of them made a bad choice, when good sense took a vacation. But, you still count them as part of the family, because you still trust them and still care about them. That is what God is looking for. Conversely, untrustworthy people and self-absorbed people are just going to mess everything up, and make heaven just like earth only longer, so they are not invited.

So, why is the world the way it is? Because God is sorting out those spirits He can trust, who care about others. The bad stuff in this world is the result of selfish people plus the occasional dumb stunts of faithful people. God can't make all the consequences of bad choices go away or we would cease to have choices, so we could not choose to trust or to care. So, we are stuck with the downhill spiral of planet earth. But, it does give us a clear choice between trusting God and trusting ourselves.

So, once we pick God, what then? Are we just along for the ride until the expiration date on the mud suit or of creation itself, whichever comes first? No. We all have jobs to do, or, we could say, each faithful person has the same job title, but different specific tasks. We are all priests, we are all ambassadors, we are all walking, breathing evidence that Jesus is God. But we all are in different situations, so we play it out differently. We are not just biding our time until the end; we are gainfully employed in the kingdom of God; we are executing the plan as a family.

Do you look at yourself as an essential part of the plan? Believing your importance is the first step toward unleashing the power of the Spirit that dwells in us, by which we prove to the world that this Jesus stuff is for real. Each of us carries a piece of the evidence. Each of us is responsible for showing the evidence to the outside world. This is how God chose to expose Himself to the world. He could have accomplished His objective in an uncountable number of ways. He chose to assign this task to faithful people who are still breathing – all of them, not just certain, special ones.

But how? The New Testament contains many variations on that theme. How do we spread that message? I suggest that we learn from Jesus' techniques (and those of John the Baptist) because they both interacted with outsiders, not church folks – because there was no church yet. The part from the Book of Acts through the Letters to Revelation were addressed to Christians.

Jesus and John the Baptist spoke to those who lived before the church started, before there were Christians. So, they are a good example for us, so we can learn to relate some really good news to non-Christians around us.

This lesson is about leadership – because all faithful people are supposed to be leaders. How do we lead outsiders to faith expressing itself through love?

Not long after the church began, leadership in the church became consolidated in a few people. Because leaders in general do not trust followers, they also consolidated the spreading of the message – generally out of fear that those ignorant, immature followers would mess it up. As we get into this, I will address that. If I’m a leader, how do I know if I’m doing it right, that I’m not messing up the message like several people about whom we read in the New Testament? In general, here’s your choice. You can sit back and let someone else mess it up, or you can let the Spirit out of the bag. Yes, that’s the heart of the answer. Each one of us, each faithful person, is promised the tools to spread this message. From my observation of the faithful and the target audience, the Spirit is going to have to keep this pretty simple. And it is. Here are my observations about how Jesus and John the Baptist spread the Good News to a bunch of outsiders.

Step One: Jesus (and John the Baptist) often led with “Repent.” But that was not a religious word for them. It was “Turn around” or “Wake up.” We are suggesting to people that life can be better. We ask about their current direction by asking, “How’s that working for you?”

Unfortunately, a lot of people we meet are fairly happy with how their lives are going. Neither Jesus nor John the Baptist cornered unwilling audiences. They spoke to those who came to see what was going on. We cannot do much about those who are not interested. Our objective is to have something to say that would make interested people’s lives better. How do we do that? Ask questions and listen to the answers. Maybe immediately, maybe after several conversations you will be able to figure out what they really want. Usually, people are focused on physical things, but there is another need behind it, a desire for happiness, contentment, peace, or just a little less stress. We can say, “So, you are not getting where you want to be. How about a different approach?”

With that start, they can then learn about the nature of God and the promises of God. The people we meet are no more messed up than the Jews in Israel in Jesus’ day, or the Jewish Christians not willing to leave the Law behind, and the Gentiles with their culturally infused paganism. The gospel is for messed up people. We may not use the word, repent, because that word now is all tied up in negative religion, but we have the same message, “Turn around. What you are looking for is over here.”

Step Two: Advance advertising. Remember how Jesus sent out twelve disciples in Matthew 10, then 70 disciples in Luke 10 to visit the towns where He was planning to go? The point was to make the village people aware that something big was coming. So, when Jesus arrived, people were more inclined to check it out. We can’t expect people to show up at the building because we have a big yellow and red banner on it. We are the advance advertising.

Jesus gave those two groups some instructions before He sent them off. First, He told them to go to those who were listening, not to beat their heads against a pagan wall. If your neighbor isn’t interested, be nice, but move on. If interest later blossoms, your neighbor will know whom to ask.

In addition, Jesus told them to ask strangers for help. They were not to take luggage and an expense account; they were supposed to let people take them in and care for them. Ask your neighbor for a hand with something. If you are beholden to them for a favor, they feel that they

are in the superior position. You are not so threatening. They are more comfortable and more likely to listen. And, if they are really grumpy and won't lend you a hand, you would be wasting your time talking about the gospel.

Jesus also told them that fixing things gets attention. The disciples were to heal the sick, raise the dead, and cast out demons. OK, we didn't get that skill set. But we can do equally miraculous things like showing them superhuman kindness and an eerie peacefulness and the ability to find the help they have been needing but have been unable to find. We take the time to pay attention to them. Outsiders get stunned by such things. Then we get to say, "This is nothing. We do this kind of strange stuff all the time. You ought to come by and meet the rest of the family some time. They are really different."

In other words, expect miracles, be creative, and be open to weirdness. Give examples of unexplainable things you have seen amongst the group. Get the idea across that such events are routine, not isolated incidents. Outsiders probably won't believe you, but it will get their curiosity up. Maybe they will open the door a crack and let you in. Certainly, there are people who already want to find the truth in the Scriptures; so study with them. Most people have no confidence in the process. If they come to know us, they will be much more accepting of what we have to say.

Third, both Matthew and Mark (Matthew 7:29 and Mark 1:22) record that the people "were astonished at His teaching, for He taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes."

That "authority" word is interesting. This kind of authority was not the kind you get by being the king's envoy, so that what you say is as if the king himself said it. No. This kind of authority is what you get when you act like you know what you are doing and are not concerned about endorsements or playing through the power of another. Jesus did not cite fourteen opinions by various rabbis to give weight to His teaching. He did not rely on an endorsement from the High Priest. That's what the Sanhedrin, the ruling Jewish council, wanted to know from Peter and John, "By what power or in what name have you done this?" Jesus and, later, the apostles, just spoke plainly and simply and let the listener figure it out.

We can do that. Say what you think and say it like you mean it. All too often we water down our statements with, "I think..." That's unnecessary – redundant. It's coming out of your mouth, so it is your opinion. You don't need to tell how many people agree with you. That's unimportant. References to famous people or scholarly books are unnecessary; footnotes are for term papers.

So why don't we speak what we believe confidently and unequivocally? Probably because we are not really sure that we are right. Look at it this way. How many times have you told someone something about Christianity and later found out you were just wrong? Certainly, it's embarrassing, but really it does not happen all that often. And if it happens, just go back and fix it. The person will just see you as less intimidating.

You are raising awareness that life can make sense, that the universe can be consistent, that joy is available. They can learn the mechanics later, with the family. The mechanics won't make sense until they have the Spirit anyway.

Fourth, Jesus did not quote a lot of Scripture. I guess "a lot" is a relative term. Here's what I mean. I skimmed through the gospels and collected up all the places where Jesus made reference to the Bible of His time, the Old Testament. Here are my statistics.

- When Jesus referenced history, He summarized. The only details He gave were the ones that addressed His point. Jesus referenced Jonah a few times, but all He said was that Jonah spent three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster. He just assumed

that the audience knew the rest of the story. We can do that also. Certainly, not many people we talk to will know all those Old Testament stories. But, you are much better off treating them as if they know more than they do, rather than as if they were a bunch of dummies. Jesus made a big, positive assumption that his audience was capable and knowledgeable; so can we.

- Sixteen times Jesus made reference to the Ten Commandments, but as starting points, not as beating them over the head. He assumed that they already agreed with the Ten Commandments, whether they actually practiced them or not, and then drew conclusions from there to teach something else. For example, Jesus started with, “Y’all agree with ‘Thou shalt not murder.’ But isn’t it the same thing to be angry with someone or to insult them? In those little things, you show that, if you thought you could get away with it, you just might kill them. It’s what is going on in your heart that is important.” We can do that, too: suggesting to people that consistency from heart to hands is the real point, not just going through modern religious motions.
- Twenty-six times Jesus cited predictions from Old Testament prophets, that what they wrote was coming true in Him. It was evidence. We can do the same.
- Five times, only five, Jesus cited a familiar line from the Old Testament to validate His action, like “My house is a house of prayer” to defend His actions of forcibly evicting the money changers and animal sellers from the Temple courtyard.
- What Jesus did not do was cite a Scripture to validate each thing He said. Have you heard lessons in which the presenter had a verse to read for everything? First, the verses are not together, so you have to hunt all over for them, and the speaker probably has moved on before you get there. Second, you don’t have time to evaluate the context to see if the speaker is using that Scripture properly. My impression is that people who do such are just trying to get people to accept what they say based on a quotation from the Bible, which essentially is appropriating God’s endorsement without His consent: borrowed authority. Rather, what Jesus said was left to stand or fall on its own. If you search through the Old Testament, you can find a verse that matches up with every sentence spoken by Jesus as recorded in the gospels. But Jesus did not give the citation. We can do the same. We do not need to memorize hundreds of verses to silence conversation. We need to just speak the truth. Those quotes will start coming to mind as you become more and more familiar with the Scriptures – but you still don’t need to quote them – it puts outsiders off, anyway. Rather, summarize it and let its truth stand on its own.

See how easy this is getting? This is why every Christian is an ambassador. You don’t need years of advanced study to communicate the Good News. Just tell people what makes sense to you. As you gain in wisdom, knowledge, and understanding, you will have more topics you can relate to outsiders, but each one will still just be ordinary common sense.

Fifthly and finally, Jesus’ style was parables, analogies, and pithy one-liners. Jesus’ parables and analogies illustrated the consistency of the universe. Think about the parable of the sower. It’s true about seeds in a field; it’s true about the ideas about God in the hearts of people. Christianity is not the realm of scholars or space cadets. Everything about life fits together. Outsiders rarely see that. To them, life is a confusing montage of disjointed events. Most people have absorbed that pagan notion that religion is mysterious, probably not sensible, and certainly not fun. When you talk about how life can come together and make sense, they will be interested. Bobby McFerrin sold millions of copies of “Don’t Worry, Be Happy” not just

because it was a catchy tune. That's what people want; they just don't know how to get there in one piece.

You can read Jesus' parables (almost all of them are in Luke) and update them to a modern backdrop. The point of the story will be the same. The fact that the prodigal son ended up feeding pigs was Jesus' illustration because He and His audience were Jewish, so pig tenders were a low as you could go. You can make him an off-ramp panhandler or a politician.

Spend some time making your own pithy one-liners, or borrow them, like Floyd's, "Try harder; fail bigger," then talk about the work of the Spirit. Or Brian's, "God didn't have to be a rocket scientist to know we were going to mess this up," then talk about the diversity of denominations. Or Kati's, "Trust God, love people," and talk about the simplicity of the gospel. Those make sense to people. Then you have a platform for the rest of the story.

Every Christian is important, essential to the plan. When you really believe that, the door is opened for the Spirit who has been given to dwell in each faithful person. In addition to a large collection of godly character traits, we are promised understanding and wisdom to get this job done. All we need to do is give outsiders a positive expectation, then bring them home to meet the family.