

3 January 2016

Witness Me
Romans 1:8-17

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First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed throughout the world. For God, whom I serve with my spirit by announcing the gospel of his Son, is my witness that without ceasing I remember you always in my prayers, asking that by God's will I may somehow at last succeed in coming to you. For I am longing to see you so that I may share with you some spiritual gift to strengthen you — or rather so that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine. I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that I have often intended to come to you (but thus far have been prevented), in order that I may reap some harvest among you as I have among the rest of the Gentiles. I am a debtor both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish — hence my eagerness to proclaim the gospel to you also who are in Rome. For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, 'The one who is righteous will live by faith.'

Paul says, "I am not ashamed of the gospel." Maybe you've heard this verse before. If you'd grown up as I did, you would have lost count how many times. It was one of the key verses that informed my evangelical childhood. I can even sing it for you. As a teen, my youth group did a whole musical about witnessing, and one of the anthems began ... "I am not ashamed of the gospel!"

But mostly this verse was the source of guilt for me as a youth. You see, I was very much afraid that I *was* ashamed of the gospel. I knew I was supposed to witness to my friends, to lead them to the Lord, to share my faith, to present the plan of salvation, so that they could be saved, could accept Jesus Christ as their personal Lord and Savior, could come to a saving knowledge of Christ. I knew I should. I even knew whom I should be witnessing to. My zoology lab partner – David Linton – was not a part of my youth group, which I assumed meant that he wasn't saved. I really liked David, and I didn't want him to go to hell, so I *knew* I should witness to him. I prayed for strength and courage to do so. But every time an opportunity came up, my heart would pound and I'd get all tongue-tied and say nothing. I was a terrible Christian.

At least I wasn't alone. There must have been a lot of us terrible Christian youth who were ashamed of the gospel, because our youth leaders had to keep nagging at us to get out there and witness. For instance, more than once I was told to imagine myself on judgment day, standing in the line to the gate of heaven along with those who were saved, then looking over to see the ,, *other* line, where one of my classmates was pointing a reproachful finger at me. "It's not fair! He never told me!" And yes, in my mind, that accusing finger belonged to David. He was the one going to hell because I was afraid to witness. Usually, though, youth groups took a more positive approach, offering us special training on how to witness. There was EE (that's Evangelism Explosion) and CWT (Continued Witness Training) and the one whose initials I've

forgotten that trained me to be a counselor for a Billy Graham crusade. In these trainings we learned to memorize our script, so we wouldn't muddle the details, but mostly we just got to practice witnessing to each other. The idea was to get over our fear by repetition, to condition ourselves to the process. I've learned since then that these evangelism training programs are based on the programs used to train salesmen and telemarketers. But I did them, because I didn't *want* to be ashamed of the gospel.

At no point during those early years of earnest adolescent faith did it occur to me to wonder about this expectation that I should go out with witnessing with my tracts and memorized Bible verses and scripted lines. It never once occurred to me to question any "gospel" that required behavioral conditioning exercises and training in sales techniques to present. I never asked those questions then. Since then, as you've gathered, I have asked all those questions and more and, as a result, I've rejected most of the presuppositions of my early evangelism training. So you can breath a sigh of relief. We aren't going to do that stuff. Paul did not say "I am not ashamed of the gospel" so as to browbeat people into streetcorner evangelism. But before we relax too much, we do have to ask, *Then what did Paul mean?*

A little background here: Paul is writing to a small group of Christians in a great capital city he's never been to. And it isn't easy to be a Christian in Rome. While no one was throwing them to the lions yet, Christians were regarded with deep suspicion. They were seen as a cult group with strange teachings about resurrection from the dead and eating flesh and blood. They had come out of the Jewish faith, but even the Jews had cut ties to them. A few years earlier, the emperor Claudius had even expelled them from Rome, but things had settled down a little, and many of them had returned. So Paul was writing to people who had reason to be nervous. Even betraying the fact that you *were* a Christian could be dangerous. It would have been tempting to go completely undercover and hide your faith. That's what Paul is dealing with in our passage. He says no. The good news of Christ too important to lock away in a secret inner compartment.

Which we often do, don't we? Oh, we don't send people out to knock on doors and recite memorized speeches starting with, "If you died tonight, are you sure you would go to heaven?" Nor will we. Ever. But on the other hand it seems that when we aren't actually in church, we actively avoid talking about our faith, or even admitting that we have one, as if believing in Christ were in bad taste. To be perfectly honest, I suspect that an outside observer looking at United Methodists might conclude that we are, in fact, ashamed of the gospel.

We're stuck in a sort of evangelistic paralysis, not wanting to do "evangelism" in the way that we usually see it done, but not knowing any other way. The gospel of Jesus Christ is, I hope and believe, a core element of our being. It is the thing that holds firm when everything else may tremble or collapse. It is important to us. That's why is wrong to treat it as a commodity for sale, as some evangelism programs do. But the gospel is also too important to keep hidden. There are things that are fine to keep hidden. If you're a secret fan of the Bee Gees, by all means keep it hidden. Nobody needs to know that you sing through the Saturday Night Fever album alone in the car on long trips, because that would be a little embarrassing. But our relationship with Christ represents our hope and purpose and meaning. It is not just an unfashionable personal preference. It matters more than that.

So let me give you a few thoughts on how we *can* communicate the gospel. Let me start by establishing some new ground rules. First of all, we are not recruiting members. We do not tell the good news with an ulterior purpose – to persuade anyone to join our group, agree with our opinions, or do anything that they don't want to do. Nothing done with a hidden agenda is good news. No, our witness needs to be more humble than that, not assuming that we know exactly what what others need, but simply knowing what Christ has done for us.

Second, we are not God's only plan for other people's salvation. The burden of saving our neighbors' souls does not rest entirely on us. God loves them too much to leave their fate in our hands. And, frankly, God's smarter than that. Remember that imaginary scenario, where I was to picture David dropping into hell pointing a reproachful finger at me? To tell a fifteen-year-old boy that my friend is going to hell, and it's my fault – that qualifies as spiritual child abuse. And it's not true. We are not told to go out and save souls. Instead we are invited to be a part of God's plan to draw all people into restored relationship. By living lives that show how Christ is transforming us, *and by being willing to tell others who it is who is at work in us*, we enter into a grand partnership with God. Not only are we granted the grace of being led along the path toward God, but we are given the privilege of helping others walk alongside us.

And that leads to one final, but important distinction. The gospel – the good news – is not about knowledge but relationship. We are not restored to relationship with God by learning a set of facts or concepts and agreeing with them; we are redeemed by encountering a living God. And the only way to communicate a relationship with someone is to tell our own history with that person, to tell our own stories.

In the recent movie, “Mad Max: Fury Road” – not my fault; my kids made me watch it – there was an interesting detail. The movie is set in a post-apocalyptic wasteland among people stripped down to their most primal selves. Two or three times in the movie, a character would do something heroic, and before doing it would stand tall and shout to everyone, “Witness me!” Now not *everything* about that movie will stay with me, God willing. But I was struck by that cry. Witness me! I was taught to “witness” by learning how to read step by step tracts and Bible verses aloud, but the only witness I actually have is myself. For better or worse, the only story I can tell with deep conviction is my own. The gospel I can present with integrity is what God has done and is doing with me. Witness me.

And that shouldn't be scary. It's certainly nothing to be embarrassed about. God loves me and is working on me. Patiently. I am not ashamed of that gospel. Witness me.