

Chapter 28

Sharing the good news where we are

H ave you ever known someone recently engaged to be married? Somehow, the name of the beloved keeps coming up whatever the subject under discussion. Whether talking about food, literature, music or sport, ‘Oh yes, Daryl always likes, recommends, or plays, that’, says Daisy. Eventually we start to think of the unknown Daryl as a real person, someone Daisy not only loves but also loves to talk about. Her words are truly the overflow of her heart.

At this stage, I hope that you know Jesus as your Saviour and Lord of your life and, like Daisy, long to share the good news with all comers. Some live in a culture where open confession could risk family hostility, if not worse. Yet it does not take long to realise that Daisy’s heart is fixed on Daryl, even though some perhaps wonder what she sees in him. Even so, some of her unattached friends may feel a little envious of Daisy’s obvious happiness. In the same way, those who (perhaps without realising) hunger to know God for themselves may try to find out more when they see the changed priorities of a newly committed life.

It is true that good news is worth sharing. Those brought up in a formally Christian environment perhaps think of faith as a creed to be carefully recited from memory, or certain rituals to be followed, rather than knowing the newness of life made possible when lived in daily fellowship with a loving God. They may think that religious belief is either just a formal affair or too private to talk about in any depth. However accurate some creeds might be, the Bible indicates that belief should stir the will and affect behaviour; lives and lips together should confirm what is so often being automatically recited. We are not merely offered membership of a formal religion but a personal relationship with our creator God, made possible through the mediation of his Son. The same offer holds for those who so far have belonged to other faiths.

Living the life

Many people were first attracted to the Christian faith because of the difference they saw in friends, fellow students or work colleagues who knew, loved and followed the Lord Jesus Christ in the strength of his Spirit. Such lives are different because they are given over to him and have started to reflect God's great intention by showing some features of the divine image.¹ This process does not happen by our own willpower or by orders of anyone else, but by personal commitment to finding and following the loving purposes of our Lord and Saviour, enabled by co-operation with his Spirit.

The more we get to know about God's intention the more we realise how far there is still to go before we truly reflect the likeness of Jesus. Just as a maturing tadpole begins to develop little limb buds, hinting at frogginess to come while not yet ready to live out of water, so our earthbound lives will start to be changed by his Spirit within. At first, there will only be a shadowy, immature likeness to the one into whose full image we are intended to grow. As long as believers in Jesus live here on earth this will always be a work in progress, a truth we realise more and more the older we grow. Yet his desire is for us to inspire others and help them to know him too.²

Enthusiastic believers can sometimes cause embarrassment by feeling it a compulsive and uninvited duty to force their beliefs on others. Yet this could simply be a turn-off rather than a natural overflow of the love of God. One way to introduce the all-important subject is to 'raise a flag', that is, to mention something to do with Christian things without coming across as a preachy know-all.

Putting up flags

I have Norwegian friends, and when in Norway with them I have noticed how the Norwegian flag flies openly outside so many houses, including theirs. During long years of enemy occupation this was forbidden, so now a raised flag signals their freedom. My friends make no fuss about their national loyalties and although obviously more at ease with those who speak the same language they still give a great

welcome to others, ready to say more about their flag if anyone asks. In the same way, as we quietly indicate our own loyalty and love for God and enjoy being with others of the same mind, we will welcome those who may want to ask us more. Perhaps they will borrow a relevant book, or in time start a deeper conversation about the freedom we now enjoy as members of God's family.

Building bridges

We possibly have little spare time or energy when the working day ends (if ever!) but there could well be others, perhaps on their own, who are in the same position. Ways of building bridges could be to invite one or two people for a meal, a match, a bike ride or a concert. On a day off a country walk together would blow away the cobwebs and it is easier to talk side by side. We'll all have ways of discovering shared interests that help friendships to grow, even when busy lives limit opportunity. Hopefully our new friends will gradually realise that our main purpose and pleasures in life are significantly different from those of many other people. Even if they do not always go along with the crowd, they can still be curious about some of our own activities and raise flags of their own to say so.

For many, Christianity may just be one of the great religions and it could be a totally new idea that we are invited to have a personal relationship with God, opened up by his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. (For some it may even be news that the very name 'Christian' comes from his.) Add to that the promised presence and power of his Holy Spirit to teach, strengthen and guide believers day by day, and what better news can there be? – except that this will never come to an end! Clearly, like any good newscaster, we would hope to attract attention with a headline (the 'flag') and as more interest develops, go into more detail about our faith. In any case, we will keep praying for our friends and hoping to stay friendly.

Allowing the Scriptures to speak

In what were once thought of as Christian countries, increasing numbers of those who live there are no longer familiar with the basics

of Christian belief. Many do not own a Bible, or only a very ancient one. Otherwise intelligent people can show great ignorance about biblical matters, whereas others have a real hunger to learn more but don't know where to look for answers. Some seekers after truth try out one or more of the many world religions, diverted by the 'spirituality' sections in bookshops or on the internet. Others could find their search comes to rest when they meet Christians who are prepared first to listen, share their good news or perhaps study a Gospel together.

A teenager in once-atheistic Albania had been brought up with no knowledge of God. When the country at last opened up and he heard of Jesus' love and what he had done for him, he was so thrilled he immediately wanted to tell others. He was by nature an outgoing boy, so set out to share the good news with all his school friends, giving each of them one of the Bibles newly brought in by missionaries. He also began to visit a school for blind children, telling them of the way that Jesus could open their spiritual eyes because of his love for them. His boyish enthusiasm spoke volumes about what his new relationship with God meant to him and he did well to introduce his friends to the Scriptures so soon.

Help in sharing the good news

Most of us are probably not as bold as that schoolboy, and in conversations that may follow our flag-raising we sometimes feel a bit lost as to what to say or how to say it. There is help on hand. As well as thinking about studying a Gospel together by using *Uncover*, there are some Christian Unions, professional bodies and churches with 'just looking' groups. Interested friends could be invited to these, assured that their questions would be taken seriously. The Christian Medical Fellowship runs *Saline Solution* courses, designed to show how to be sensitive when sharing our good news in a professional setting. Through the Holy Spirit, God will be gracious about backing up sincere but stumbling efforts to introduce others to him and will speak in powerful ways beyond our own understanding. Nothing is hidden from him, including thoughts and attitudes.³

Some of our friends may later be willing to join in a more concentrated

time of reading and learning, perhaps at a day conference or a residential weekend. Developed with this sort of audience in mind are the courses *Christianity Explored* and *Alpha*. CMF also runs local and regional conferences for health professionals. My university roommate and I met on our first day at medical school and she became a Christian a year or two later. Her doctor father paid the bill for the two of us to go to a CMF student conference over a weekend where we had good teaching and a lot of fun. Both played their part in opening up her mind, heart and will to entrust her life to the love of Jesus. Our existing friendship had taken us both to the conference but later we had even more in common and remained lifelong friends.

What if I do believe, but what if I don't?

This is one of the questions our newer friends may ask. In answer, one tested and tried mnemonic can be useful: 'God, man, God; what if I do and what if I don't?' When unpacked, this covers God's plan for mankind, made in his image but spoiled by human self-will.

The coming of Jesus offered the way to restore the broken relationship, that offer having consequences whether accepted or rejected. We would prefer not to talk about the second set of consequences but it is too important to ignore. It is easier to speak of the forgiveness, joy, new life and spiritual growth that can all follow the handing over of our lives to our Lord Jesus Christ.

Yet Jesus also made it plain that to count him out carelessly or deliberately will mean to suffer the eventual knowledge that more has been rejected than was ever thought possible. His aim was not to frighten people into belief but to draw them to himself by his love. Even so he warned them of the consequences of refusal to be drawn. We touched on these in chapter 18.

Most of the relevant biblical references using the English word hell refer to *Sheol*, or *Hades*, meaning simply the place of the dead. Jesus made an unusually full and direct reference to it as a place of torment in a story he told about a rich man who ended up there. In life he had lived very comfortably, but regularly walked past poor sick Lazarus at his gate with no offer to help him. In the hereafter the poor man found

comfort and the rich man endured fiery suffering. Behaviour towards others in life affects what we face in the afterlife.^{4,5} Some have used the description of the rich man's agonies as the literal expectation of all who have rejected Jesus' offer of forgiveness. Yet when Jesus spoke of Dives and Lazarus it was in the context of a story evidently intended to bring home the serious message that repentance can come too late. For some death will bring everlasting joy, for others eternal separation from God. In his book *The Great Divorce*, CS Lewis makes the point that to have chosen to live apart from him in life will be to experience more of the same after death.

The Gospels show how Jesus was obviously happier to speak of the joys of heaven⁶ than the alternative of needless perishing. He taught that 'eternal life' starts now as we come to know God through his Son.^{7,8,9} We need to keep praying for our friends, and in this we have Jesus' example. Right at the end of his earthly life, he prayed for those who were putting him to death or were watching how he bore his sufferings. At least one repented of wrongdoing, right at the last hour.¹⁰

To miss out on the joys of the new life on offer brings needless loss and hopelessness here and now yet, sadly, there are still those who turn their backs and deafen their ears to the divine invitation to trust and follow Jesus, God's Son, and find newness of life. Perhaps they mock the whole idea of his existence, or turn to other gods. We also have to leave with our loving, just and merciful God the full meaning of Bible passages that perhaps we find it hard to understand. A picture that helps me to get a glimmer of what could happen is that of the abandoned babies I saw years ago in Eastern European orphanages. At that time, they had been separated from love by its having been withdrawn from them, and some of them died of the deprivation. It is the other way round for people who choose to reject the love on offer but whose souls may undergo the same process of failing to thrive to the point of death.

As in so much else, including the destiny of those who have never heard the good news on offer, we have to be confident that our Lord, who knows all, will only do what is right.¹¹ To be left uncertain and uncomfortable about exactly what will happen to those who do not

believe makes it more urgent to tell our positive story. It is wonderfully possible to experience the power of Jesus' resurrected life through the presence and power of his Holy Spirit. He changes lives, and any who believe can know this. To turn the back on such a wonderful offer would indeed mean great loss, but how can people believe unless a convinced messenger sets out to tell them?

Confidence in God's help grows as we experience it and find that seeds can take root in unlikely ground when watered with prayer and then looked after. By tuning in to God's voice we become open channels of his love. Our lives and lips should give the same message but the work of convincing someone of the truth of the good news we share is entirely the work of the Holy Spirit, however persuasive we may hope to be.

Making sure of a refill

Years ago, I listened to Dr Paul Brand, the great leprosy surgeon, give a talk in which he illustrated an important point. He took a very full glass of water, walked across the stage with it and then deliberately tripped so that some of the water spilled out. He used this to show that what fills our hearts will be made obvious when we experience some of the stresses of life, a point sometimes made in film versions of bad-tempered surgeons in action. When we meet something unsettling, we would hope to be so filled with the Holy Spirit that some telling evidence will overflow. For a glass, a cup, or a life to run over, it must first be filled. A very real test of whether others will find our message convincing is how we respond to life's different circumstances, whether good or not so good.

The filled heart overflows. One bright sunny day a flock of ducks flew up just as a stranger and I were crossing a canal bridge at the same time. The lady was from Singapore so lacked British reserve as she excitedly turned to me and joyfully exclaimed, 'Praise God! Isn't he wonderful?' Of course, I had to agree! – and she is still a good friend. Yet she could equally have been showing something of her overflowing joy in the Lord to someone who had never met that before.

So that our spirits can overflow so helpfully we need to stay open to the touch of the Holy Spirit through prayer, absorbing God's word regularly and when possible sharing these activities with one or more others. In busy lives, opportunities for fellowship can be hard to come by but it is so encouraging to find a teaching church (and get there) and to meet and know other believers, either there or in the workplace. Jesus promised that when we meet he would be there as well.¹² The pieces of hot fuel on a barbecue go cold unless they stay close together, a risk also for those who face isolation from Christian fellowship. If visits are not possible, friends need to warm each other by their prayers, phone calls or correspondence.

The family of God

At gatherings for the Olympic Games, those chosen to represent their countries feel honoured to take part and carry their national flags with pride. We, too, are honoured to raise the flags that tell of our citizenship of a different kingdom, the kingdom and family of God.¹³ The only passport needed to enter this kingdom is the equivalent of a birth certificate to confirm that we have been born again, through faith in the work of his beloved Son on our behalf, and are now the children of a heavenly Father.^{14, 15} The complete family record is kept in God's great books.^{16, 17} Until he opens these at the last day we do not know what other names will be found there or what deeds are recorded. How wonderful it would be to find that some in the book of life had been those we had helped to enrol. They too will reach our Father's home as accepted family members, all sins wiped from the record by the mediation of Jesus, our loving and beloved older brother. As we pass beyond death to the next stage of our eternal lives, we shall at last be fully restored to the image of the Lord Jesus Christ, God's great intention fulfilled.¹⁸

For further thought

- If you are a new Christian, have you told anyone else?
- Did you realise that life and lip should be saying the same thing?
- Could you explain to someone else God's great intention and how he fulfils it?

Further resources

- Pippert RM. *Uncover Seeker Bible study guides*. Oxford: University and Colleges Christian Fellowship, 2012
- Lewis CS. *The great divorce*. London: Geoffrey Bles UK, 1945.

References

1. 2 Corinthians 3:18
2. Romans 10:9-15
3. Hebrews 4:12- 13
4. Luke 16:19-31
5. Matthew 25:31-46
6. Luke 15:7, 10
7. John 3:16-18
8. John 6:40
9. John 17:3
10. Luke 23:33-34, 39-43
11. Genesis 18:25
12. Matthew 18:20
13. John 3:3, 5-6
14. Ephesians 2:19-20
15. John 19-13
16. Revelation 3:5
17. Revelation 20:11-12
18. Philippians 3:20-21

