

by GB Howell, Jr.

On a warm spring afternoon Gene and I were doing what we did every day—we were sitting in the front seat of his mother’s Volkswagen Beetle waiting for her to get out of school. His mom, a middle-school math teacher, was our ride home. Gene and I had discussed any number of topics through the weeks: girls, homework, our families, scouting, and even church. This afternoon was different, though. I sat today with an open Bible on my lap, trying to explain to Gene how he could know Christ. Using what I know now to be a modified Roman-road presentation, I explained that God loved him, that we were all sinners, that Christ paid the penalty for our sins, and that if we confessed and believed, we could be saved. That afternoon, Gene bowed his head and gave his heart to Jesus Christ. He was the first person I ever led to faith in Christ. He was in the seventh grade, and I, in the eighth.

Through the years I have had the opportunity to lead many individuals to faith in Christ. Never once, though, has the experience become trite or routine. Instead in my mind I visualize angels watching in anticipation as eternity literally hangs in the balance for another individual. And if the person prays to receive Christ, those angels race to the Father to share joyfully the news that one who was lost has been found. It is time to party! There is no feeling or satisfaction like it. My response is always one of exhilaration.

Some years ago at the Southern Baptist Convention meeting in New Orleans, a shocking statistic echoed in my spirit. Ninety-five percent of all Southern Baptists never share their faith in Jesus Christ. Ninety-five percent! So today we are going to look at why we need to become serious and intentional about sharing with others our faith in Jesus Christ.

Today we are going to be looking at 2 Corinthians 5 as we consider, “Why Do We Share Our Faith?”

“Now everything is from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that is, in Christ, God was reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed the message of reconciliation to us. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ; certain that God is appealing through us, we plead on Christ’s behalf. ‘Be reconciled to God’” (2 Cor. 5:18-20, HCSB).

Acts 18 presents the background for the founding of the

church at Corinth. During Paul’s second missionary journey, his travels took him to many cities in what is modern-day Turkey and Greece (see Acts 15:36-18:23). One of those cities was Corinth, one of the major commercial centers of the Roman Empire. Paul spent eighteen months in Corinth. In those months he established what became the church at Corinth. Being the founding pastor meant he knew the church. He knew its strengths and weaknesses—its abilities and shortcomings. And he knew that God had strategically placed this church at such an important crossroad, where a mix of cultures, peoples, and beliefs merged in this cosmopolitan city. To believers in this city, Paul said, “We are ambassadors for Christ” (2 Cor. 5:20).

Like those first-century believers, God has strategically placed us where we will intersect with people. He has placed us in our particular neighborhood, our job, our family relations so in those settings we can be ambassadors for Him. We have an obligation to share. We have an obligation to tell. We have an obligation to invite others to faith in Jesus Christ.

Why is that? Why do we have that obligation to be witnesses for Him? Today, we consider several reasons.

1. Because of the Condition of Those Who Are Lost

Paul says in verse 17, “Therefore if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation; old things have passed away, and look, new things have come.”

I wonder, as Paul wrote these words, if his pen stopped. I wonder if there was a huge pause before he started this sentence. Did those words ring in his mind, “anyone in Christ . . . is a new creation”? I wonder if Paul’s mind raced back through the pages of his life before he knew Christ. I wonder if he thought back to his life as a Pharisee full of zeal. I wonder if he pictured his days as a student sitting at the feet of his highly-respected instructor, Gamaliel (see Acts 5:34; 22:3). I wonder if he had flashbacks of Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, drawing his last breath. I wonder if he felt the intensity of the light that shined on him as he traveled the road to Damascus—and how his life had changed since that moment. Did he do a before-and-after? Did he imagine others whose lives had changed because they had met Christ? Was there that “ah-ha moment” when Paul exclaimed to himself, “we really do become new creatures”?

Paul had seen the before. He knew the condition of those

who were lost. And he knew how people's lives could be changed. He had seen it in himself.

He had seen it in Corinth, a town steeped in Roman tradition—Corinth, with its temples to pagan and mythological gods, with its temple prostitution. He had seen persons move from those places of pagan worship and sinful lifestyles who came to know and worship the true and living God (see 1 Cor. 6:1-11). They had moved from a spiritual vacuum to spiritual fulfillment.

So Paul could remind these believers, “God was in Christ . . . reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed the message of reconciliation to us” (2 Cor. 5:19).

Part of the reason that we share, that we tell, that we have concern for our coworkers, family members, and friends who do not yet know Christ is because we have been there. We know the hollowness of being without Christ. We know the spiritual void. And we know how futile it is to try to fill that void with pleasure, possessions, or prestige. They don't last. They don't satisfy. They offer, at best, a temporary substitute for genuine satisfaction. That is why we always need more. None of those things truly satisfy.

John gave us the details of Jesus' encounter with a Samaritan woman who was at Jacob's well in Sychar (see John 4:1-42). The two of them talked, just Jesus and the woman. This was the first time this lady had ever met Jesus. She had not seen miracles. She had not heard Jesus preach to the multitudes. She had not seen others' lives changed. But something inside her was happening. Something in her was changing. Hers was a beginning faith. Yet she knew that in meeting this Jewish man at the well, life would never be the same again. As a result, the first thing she did was drop her water pot beside the well and run back to her village, “Come meet a man! Come meet a man.” The Bible says that many believed because of this lady's witness (v. 39).

If anyone in the Gospels knew what it was to have a colorful “before” picture, it was this lady. Her past was colorful, to say the least. She had been married five times. She was at the time living with a man. If anyone knew what it was to have experienced a dreadful beginning, it was this lady. But as Jesus talked, her heart was changed, her spirit was moved, something began to stir her spiritually. And she could not wait to tell others. Why? Because her life would never be the same again. As she was running to the village, at the same time she was walking into newness of life. Her life was being radically changed.

Part of the reason that we share is because we have been there, but thank God—our lives are changed! We share because of the condition of those who are lost.

II. Because We Have Been Commissioned by Christ

Paul says, “[God] has committed the message of reconciliation to us. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ” (2 Cor. 5:19b-20). An ambassador is an individual who has been given the task of delivering a message from one party to another. An ambassador represents the one who has sent him and is committed exclusively to the sender. The ambassador is not a negotiator or a broker of compromise. He is a representative who stands in the place of the one who has sent him.

Paul tells us exactly what our message is as ambassadors; it is the message of reconciliation—that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself. Those who are lost, estranged, and far off can now be reconciled to God.

What does that mean, reconciled? We usually think of that word in relation to a divorce. A couple divorces because they have “irreconcilable differences.” Or we think of it in relation to balancing our checkbook or “reconciling our bank statement.” What does that mean?

It means we take two entities, the checks and our check record, and make sure they line up, that they tally, that they come to the same conclusion. A couple with irreconcilable differences is a couple that does not line up, does not come to the same conclusion, never has and never will. It is a couple at odds with one another. They are at opposite ends of the spectrum. They are dynamite and matches; a pit-bull and a poodle; Dom DeLuise and a speedo—they just don't belong together. Irreconcilable differences.

Well, by His very nature, God is holy and just. He is omnipotent and majestic. He is hallowed and divine. He is what theologians have called, “Holy-other.” He is all that is good, pure, and glorious.

And what is man? We are but creatures of dust. We are depraved, given to our own desires and satisfactions. We are selfish and self-centered. We are sinful and fallen.

God is at one end—we, at the other. He is light; we are darkness. He is righteous; we are wretched. He is Father; we are fallen. How could two that are at such opposite ends of the spectrum come together? The glorious news is that God took the initiative and did for us what we could not do for ourselves. In Christ, God was at work reconciling the world unto Himself! He was drawing us to Himself. He was making a way for that which is sinful to become sacred, that which is fallen to become faithful, and that which is alienated to be welcomed home with open arms. And God did it for us. Why? “For God so loved the world.”

He has called us; He has commissioned us to tell others that they too can be reconciled to Him through Christ. God is not willing that any should perish, but that all should be reconciled—be brought close—to Himself. Can you allow

yourself to imagine a meeting that took place in Heaven before Christ's birth? I have imagined a meeting of the divine assembly in which God spells out His plan.

One of the angels chimes in, "Father, man has become so wicked. There is warfare and the taking of innocent life. There is cheating and unfaithfulness. Every imaginable wickedness is running rampant. The stench of rebellion and disobedience covers the earth."

The resonate voice of the Father says, "I have a plan. It is a plan formulated from the foundation of the earth. The Word shall become flesh and dwell among them. Born miraculously of a virgin—the event shall be witnessed by shepherds. In the flesh, I will dwell among them. The eyes of the blind shall be opened. The deaf will hear. The lame will walk. The dead shall live again. I shall bear the penalty for their sins."

The angels nod in agreement. They are smiling. "I shall choose a handful to follow. They will walk the roads, see the miracles, and hear the truths. I will commission them to tell others. And when I walk with them no more, I will fully reveal Myself to them in the Spirit and empower them to be witnesses of these things. They shall tell others—all who come after them—how they too can know me."

No longer are the angels nodding. Instead, they are looking at one another with furrowed brows. Finally one speaks up, "You are going to leave the message and the work to them? To those who are fallen? To man? Not to us? You are going to trust this eternal message to THEM? Don't you have another plan?"

The reality is that God has no other plan. He has no other messengers. Remember when you played tag, someone was it? We are the "it." The hymn said, "people who know go to people who need to know Jesus." It is not the job of the preacher and the missionary. It is all our job. Part of the reason God has placed you in the community where you live is so you can be a witness right where you are. The reason you have those relationships is so you can be light in the darkness with those persons. You are a minister of the gospel—cleverly disguised as a plumber, a teacher, a pilot, a nephew, or a grandmother. Those who cross your path every day—the mailman, the girl at the checkout, your neighbor across the back fence—God has been at work in them, nudging them towards faith. The Lord has placed you strategically in their paths so you can be the catalyst to move them along to the next step or even to the final step to knowing Him. Maybe it will be because of something you say or because you invite them to Bible study or to worship. Maybe you will pause and tell them about how you came to know Christ. Maybe you will invite them to know Him, too. The Holy Spirit will guide you to say the words that this one person needs to hear. Jesus' last words were,

"You will be My witnesses" (Acts 1:8). All of us are. He has commissioned you.

Why do we share? Because of the condition of those who are lost. Because Christ has commissioned us to tell others.

III. Because of the Certainty of Death

Paul begins this fifth chapter by saying, "For we know that if our earthly house, a tent, is destroyed . . ." (vs. 1). Do you know what Paul is talking about? He is not talking about a pop-up tent placed in the back yard. He is not talking about a tent used by our military. He is talking about our bodies. He says it is a tent—a temporary and mobile dwelling. It is not a palace that will remain for centuries. It is not a fort that will stand for generations. It is a tent—a temporary dwelling that we use while we are here these few years.

As Paul speaks of this temporary dwelling, did he do so with fear, sadness, or depression? Not at all! Instead, he spoke with assurance and enthusiasm of that which is permanent and eternal (see vv. 1-8). Paul had a confidence that God had something better planned. The reason for the enthusiasm was because Paul knew Christ. He knew that heaven awaited him. He knew that for a believer, "to be out of the body [is to be] at home with the Lord" (vs. 8).

Paul did not speak of death with a sense of dread and doom. In his first letter to the Corinthian believers, he explained what happens to this corruptible and temporary tent in eternity:

We will not all fall asleep, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we will be changed. Because this corruptible must be clothed with incorruptibility, and this mortal must be clothed with immortality. Now when this corruptible is clothed with incorruptibility, and this mortal is clothed with immortality, then the saying that is written will take place: Death has been swallowed up in victory. O Death, where is your victory? O Death, where is your sting? Now the sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is in the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ! (1 Cor. 15:51-57, HCSB).

Do you hear his confidence? Do you hear his assurance? Can you image facing our worst fear, death, that confidently? Because of Christ, we can. He who conquered death, hell, and the grave allows us to march confidently into eternity with Him.

Why do we tell others? Why do we share the good news with them? Because they, like we, are marching towards eternity. Our goal is that they can face that final moment with confidence, not with cowardice; with faith, not with fear; with blessed hope, and not with horror.

In the first church I pastored, we had a young girl come to our Vacation Bible School one summer. She was an angelic little girl with almost white blonde hair. Her name was Crystal. I went to visit Crystal and her family. I wanted to invite them all to church.

I found out that Crystal lived with her single mom right across the street from her grandparents, Mr. Fred and his wife, “Miss” Jessie. Crystal stayed with them during the day while her mom was at work.

I will never forget the day I met Mr. Fred and Miss Jessie. I knocked on the door and introduced myself to Miss Jessie. She invited me in for a glass of tea. Once inside, she introduced me to her husband. “Fred, this is the new preacher up at the Baptist church around the corner—you know, where Crystal has been going.” Mr. Fred looked me in the eye and said, “I ain’t got no use for preachers. You are all a bunch of hypocritical, lying, money-grubbing womanizers. And if you will excuse me, I think I have got some gardening to do.” He left. Miss Jessie said as she handed me a glass of tea, “Oh, don’t pay him no mind. He comes across really gruff. But underneath, he’s a pussycat.” I thought, Yeah, I can tell. I picked up on that right away.

Not being one to run from a challenge, I decided to try to reach Mr. Fred. I found out he liked growing tomatoes and cucumbers. So next time I was there and he left the room to go tend to his garden, I got up and followed him outside. I bragged on his tomatoes and asked how he could get the plants to harvest so early in the season. The more we talked, the more he relaxed.

I found out that Mr. Fred liked coffee. So I would drop by unexpectedly for a cup of coffee. Over the next four years, I probably drank enough coffee at their house to fill up a train car. In all those visits, I found out that Mr. Fred had worked building skyscrapers throughout the northern U.S. I discovered that he had been in the military, that he was the only surviving of four children, that he used to make “corn-squeezings,” and that he still would “take a snort” every now and then. A trusting friendship was growing. The wall was coming down.

The day the doctor called and told Miss Jessie that they had found a mass under Mr. Fred’s tongue and that he needed to have surgery, she called me. I was there for the surgery. I was there to help bring him home from the hospital. And Mr. Fred’s heart was softening.

When Vacation Bible School rolled around again, Crystal indicated she wanted to become a Christian. She had been in our church for about four years, and I knew her decision was sincere. I told her I would come by and talk to her.

Mr. Fred invited me to sit with him at the kitchen table. He poured the coffee and called Crystal in the room. Opening my Bible, I went verse-by-verse through the plan of salvation and never took my eyes off of Crystal. As I talked about God’s love, His offer of forgiveness, and what Christ has done for us, Crystal listened intently. Out of the corner of my eye, though, I could see Mr. Fred wiping his eyes. “Crystal, does everything I have said to you make since?” “Yes sir.” “Would you be willing to—right now—receive God’s free gift of forgiveness and eternal life?” “Yes sir.” Then, I looked at Mr. Fred. “And what about you, Mr. Fred? You have heard everything I have said. Does it make since to you?” “It does preacher.” “Are you ready to receive God’s gift of forgiveness and eternal life?” “Oh, preacher, I want to. I really want to. But it’s too late for me. I am 83 years old. I have waited too long. There’s no forgiveness for an old man like me.” I said, “Oh, you are wrong Mr. Fred. The Bible says, ‘whosoever will, let him come.’ It also says, ‘God is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to eternal life.’ That includes you. Are you ready to ask Christ into your life right now?”

That day at the kitchen table, a golden haired young girl and a cantankerous old man both prayed and asked Christ into their lives. When I baptized them both three weeks later, they were in the baptismal pool together. I baptized Crystal and then Mr. Fred. When Mr. Fred came up out of the water, he was crying. He hugged me and said, “Thank you for not giving up on me preacher. Thank you.”

A couple of years after I left the church, I got a phone call that Mr. Fred had passed away. A few weeks later I got a letter from Miss Jessie. She told me about Mr. Fred. And she thanked me for introducing him to Christ. She wrote, “It is great to know that I will see him again in Heaven one day.”

Why do we share? Because God has called and commissioned each of us to tell those who are lost how they can know Christ in this life and how they can live with Him in the next.

It was a warm spring afternoon. We were sitting in his mama’s Volkswagen. Gene bowed and gave his heart to Christ. He was the first that I led to Christ, but he was not my last. Who will be your first? Who will be your next?

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