

Introduction

Tell – and Show – the World

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A book we read recently assesses contemporary culture and the unusual opportunities that are opening within the culture for sharing the Christian gospel message. The author points out that, within a highly mobile society where traditional family life has broken down, relationships are prized commodities, for they are difficult to obtain and maintain. “The postmodern age,” he concludes, “is an anonymous age with a yearning for relationship.”¹ For those engaged in relational ministries with a gospel message to share, as we are in Family Ministries, these words fall on our ears with an impact not unlike the words of Jesus, “I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest.”²

In a world hungry for relationships, Christian families are in a strategic position to meet this emergent need. The gospel message we have to share is often presented in Scripture in relational terms: a personal God, whose very essence is love, cares about His connection with human beings. He has restored by His own act in Jesus Christ that which was disrupted by our failed commitment in our relationship with Him. God holds out to us the invitation to say yes to fellowship with Him and those who know Him in His redeemed community.³ Wherever the disciples of Jesus are found, the words in their hearts and on their lips are ever the same: “We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.”⁴

So there is a message, a *proclamation* that Christians have to tell the world. However, dissemination of the gospel, especially its relationship aspects, is accomplished in part by proclamation, but perhaps even more by *exemplification*, i.e. by providing examples, by modeling and mentoring. The Bible’s emphasis on “follow” and “imitate” indicates that communicating the gospel by example is also an important way the message of Christ is shared. In the Book of Hebrews we find the appeal, “Consider the outcome of [your leaders’] way of life and imitate their faith.”⁵ Paul urges his followers, “Imitate me.”⁶ With proclamation, faith springs up in the heart through hearing.⁷ With exemplification, faith is encouraged through seeing.⁸ Since people tend to become like whom or what they watch, our task is not only to “tell the world,” but to “show the world.”⁹

It is not either/or, of course. Some combination of both proclamation and exemplification is always involved in the formation of disciples. Individuals meet Jesus, attach to Him and become new believers through the modeling of older believers as the newcomers observe the way of life and listen to the prayers, personal testimonies and teaching of Jesus’ followers. This relational modeling applies particularly to settings like the home, where imitation is common. Children imitate their parents, siblings imitate one another, and married partners often exert a profound influence over each other.

Through their faithful exemplification of life in Him, couples and families can bear Christian witness to non-believing relatives as well as to couples and families in the community around them.¹⁰

All human examples of faith are flawed, of course, but the notion of imitation is a call for individuals to follow believers who follow Christ. The idea is that individuals will connect with Jesus and His people as they see the Christian way of life lived by others as human and fallible as they are. The Holy Spirit acts within the context of the connection—the relationship—that believers have with others to draw the unbelieving toward belief. “Social influence,” wrote Ellen White, “is a wonderful power. We can use it if we will as a means of helping those about us”¹¹

Jesus loves people. When He walked on earth among us, the Scripture reports that He was not always able to form the relationships with them that He wanted to, but His first inclination was to try to do so. In this He provides an example and an incentive to us. “Go and make disciples,” He said.¹² “As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”¹³ He is calling us to love, to go, to form relationships, to make disciples. To paraphrase Paul, “How can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone relating to them?”¹⁴

¹ Harry Lee Poe, *Christian Witness in a Postmodern World* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2001), 27.

² John 4:35

³ 1 John 4:8, 16; John 3:16; 2 Cor. 5:18

⁴ 1 John 1:3

⁵ Heb. 13:7

⁶ 1 Cor. 4:16

⁷ See Rom. 10:17.

⁸ See Matt. 5:16; 1 Tim. 4:12.

⁹ See Eph. 5:1; 1 Thess. 1:6; Heb. 6:12; 3 John 1:11.

¹⁰ There are many biblical examples of the saving influence members of families and communities have on each other. The exemplification of Naomi and her family clearly had a profound effect on her daughter-in-law Ruth’s becoming a believer (Ruth 1:14-16). Andrew’s enthusiastic sharing and introduction to Jesus launched his brother Peter on the way to becoming Jesus’ disciple and an apostle (John 1:40-42). Likewise, the excitement the Samaritan woman exhibited about Jesus and her introduction of her community to Him were made possible because she was connected to that community (John 4:28-30). The faith-building mentoring of Mary by Elizabeth (Luke 1:39-56), of John Mark by Barnabas (Acts 15:37-39), and of Timothy by Paul (Acts 16:1-4) was based in each case on the relationship. The moment-by-moment nurturing, relational connection of parents with their children is integral to transmission of faith to the next generation (Deut. 6:6-9; Eph. 6:4). The effect of the relationship in which an authentic Christian spouse dwells with a non-believing married partner is clearly in the mind of Paul in 1 Cor. 7:14.

¹¹ Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1942), 354.

¹² Matt. 28:19

¹³ John 13:34, 35

¹⁴ Rom. 10:14