

Does the Lord Jesus want me to tell my friends the gospel?

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Being a disciple of the Lord Jesus means doing what he asks us to do. This is fundamental to being a Christian. When I became a Christian, I repented of the idea that I was in charge of my life. Indeed, Jesus Christ was. He has been appointed king over the universe, and deserves my allegiance and joyful obedience. These ideas are so basic that I needn't argue them here.

What I want to ask is: Does the Lord Jesus, whom we live to obey and serve, expect all his followers to be propagators of the gospel or is this confined to a special group whom he has gifted for this work?

In what follows, I would like to suggest that the answer is along the lines of 'both/and' rather than 'either/or'.

There are two main reasons why I believe this to be so: the direct command of Jesus, and a right understanding of the role of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

1. Jesus' command

Matthew's Gospel comes to an end with what has become known as the Great Commission. Jesus is with the eleven disciples at the Sea of Galilee. His command to them is as follows:

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. And when they saw him they worshiped him, but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Matt 28:16-20)



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At first glance, this command may appear to be addressed exclusively to the apostolic band. Careful attention to detail will show that this cannot be so.

Firstly, the group addressed is called "the eleven disciples". They are not referred to as 'apostles' as they are in the other Gospels. Rather than being a distinctive and exclusive group, Matthew portrays them as 'proto-type' disciples. They show to us what it means to be followers of the Lord Jesus.

Further, these disciples are told to make disciples "of all nations", which would have been quite a job for just the eleven of them. And the time scale for the commission, and Jesus' presence with

them in it, was "to the end of the age". It's hard to imagine that Jesus was referring to the eleven disciples alone at this point, given that they've been dead nearly 2000 years and the end of the age is yet to come.

Finally, the very nature of the command—to make disciples and to teach them to do everything Jesus commanded—indicates that this cannot be an exclusive mission for the eleven disciples alone. It was to be a continuous mission, a mission passed on from disciple to disciple, and generation to generation, since disciple-making was one of the commands of Jesus.

I have made the case only briefly—others have done so in more detail¹—but

there is not the slightest suggestion in these verses that the Great Commission exhausts itself with the eleven disciples. It is a challenge and a command for every disciple. Those who argue that Jesus doesn't want all his disciples to be spreading his gospel must deal with this passage of the Bible, which to me seems so clear.

Building on the foundational command of the Great Commission, there are other New Testament passages which also express our Lord's expectation that his dis-

do, because I am going to the Father".

To suggest that this promise means that we who believe will do greater miracles than Jesus is to miss the point entirely (the unfortunate NIV translation of 'works' as 'miracles' hasn't helped in this regard). What Jesus expects the disciples to do is reveal the Father in an even greater way than Jesus himself has been doing. How could this possibly happen? "Because I am going to the Father." That is, the great work that Jesus has been engaged in—of revealing the Father—will

with them personally through the Holy Spirit whom he will send. The Spirit will teach them all things and remind them of everything which Jesus has taught them. And not only will the Spirit constantly bear witness to the Lord Jesus, the disciples will do likewise:

"But when the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me. And you also will bear witness, because you have been with me from the beginning." (John 15:26-27)

Here the Holy Spirit is sent by the Son from the Father and bears witness to the Lord Jesus. And the apostles are to do as the Spirit does. A similar point is made in the following chapter, which speaks of the Spirit guiding the apostles into the truth:

"He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you." (John 16:14-15)

I wonder if we have failed to ponder the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Every believer has the Holy Spirit living within them. How does the Spirit glorify Jesus and bear witness to him in and through us? Firstly he makes us think and act like the Lord Jesus; he produces the fruit of Christlikeness within us. But he also works in us to glorify Jesus as we ourselves bear witness to Christ, as we speak to our friends and pray for them that they will come to Christ.

To decide that I will not speak to my friends for one reason or another seems to me to suppress the work of the Spirit in his great desire to uplift the Lord Jesus.

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ciples will continue his work of revealing God to the world. One which fascinates me is in John's Gospel, chapter 14. When Philip asks Jesus to "show us the Father", Jesus replies,

"Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority, but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me, or else believe on account of the works themselves.

Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I am going to the Father. Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it." (John 14:9-14)

Jesus is explaining that he reveals the Father. The words and works of the Lord Jesus are the 'works' of the Father. The Son is in the Father and the Father is in the Son. So if we see and understand the Lord Jesus, we will see and understand the Father. Then comes the staggering promise: "Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he

continue through his disciples after his death, resurrection and exaltation with an even greater scope and effect. It will be with an even greater scope because it will tell of his sin-bearing and mighty resurrection (which had not yet happened), and with an even greater effect because it will extend throughout the world and down the ages. And Jesus makes a promise very similar to that of Matthew 28—that as his disciples do these "greater works", he will be with them all the way, granting whatever they ask in his name.

I wonder if we find it so difficult to spread the gospel of Jesus because we have not availed ourselves of the promise of John 14:14—that is, we haven't asked him to strengthen us and equip us for this work. If you feel like this, ask the Lord Jesus to help you. Ask him to bring you to people that you can deal with well and ask him to help you to remember what to say. It's a big promise.

2. The work of the Holy Spirit

The second reason that I am convinced that all believers should be looking for opportunities to speak to their friends about the gospel is because of the work of the Holy Spirit, whose great work is to glorify Jesus.

In John 14-16, following on from the passage we have just been considering, Jesus speaks at length about the work of the Holy Spirit. He reassures the troubled apostles that although he will leave them physically, he will come to them and be



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3. Gifts and giftedness

I need to say something about gifts and giftedness now. You may have heard some say that only those with the gift of the evangelist have to speak, and the rest of us are under no such obligation. I believe that this is a mistaken view of how gifts function and their nature.

Gifts are not exclusive, as if there are a finite, pre-determined number of, say, teachers and prophets, who do all the teaching and prophesying. If this were the case, we would need to know, from the Bible, exactly what each of the gifts were and how to recognize them. It is plain that we don't. We really don't know, for example, exactly what all the gifts of 1 Corinthians 12 were and how they functioned, and we don't need to—because the Bible writers were not giving an exhaustive, exclusive list of gifts so that we would all know what was available, like a catalogue. In 1 Corinthians 12, the diversity of gifts is described so that we will be united in each doing our part for the common good. The gifts are given to the church for its mutual building up.

Let me illustrate further from the gift of the 'teacher'. It is clear that a limited number of people in the New Testament were designated as 'teachers'. Paul explicitly says that not everyone is a 'teacher' (1 Cor 12:29), and James tells us that we shouldn't have too many (Jas 3:1). Yet in a more general sense, the activity of 'teaching' is something that all Christians should be engaged in: fathers should teach their children (Deut 6:7; Eph 6:4); older women should teach younger women (Titus 2:3-4); and all of us should teach and admonish each other with all wisdom (Col 3:16).

If all teach to some extent, who are the 'teachers' then? I assume they are those who are consistently good at doing it.

The gifts are a manifestation of the presence of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 12:7), and so they are not exclusive. If a person is indwelt by the Spirit, then that person has the potential to exercise any of the gifts. It is observable that not every Christian can exercise each of the gifts with equal proficiency. Some are so good as to be special. You will recognize this in your own congregation. In other words, it's 'both/and' not 'either/or'. Activities like teaching should be exercised by *both*

the specialist *and* all of us as we have opportunity.

It's the same with evangelism.

I have met people who just love meeting new people, and delight in speaking to them about Christ. They are able to do this with such talent and finesse, and are able to maintain an excellent relationship with people even after speaking to them in the most challenging way about Jesus. It leaves people like me awestruck. I have tried to copy them and have failed because I am not them. They are exceptional and I am not. I have learned over the years that there are times and places where I can do it, and I try to make the most of these.

Sometimes I even have a go in situations which are outside my comfort zone, and I am often surprised that they sometimes work as well. I regularly pray for opportunities to speak to people for Christ, and I also pray that God would bring me to people with whom I can work well. I believe with all my heart that he will honour such a prayer.

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I have also felt guilty when I have been in situations where I could have spoken and I refused to. I do not want anyone to relieve me of that guilt by a so-called 'theological' exception. I need you to help me to repent. That is the way true guilt is to be dealt with.

If you are a person who has been made to feel guilty because you couldn't use some method or other, please ignore that. However, I beg you not to go to the other extreme and say, "I'm no good at this; I won't ever try again". There will be a way for you to share the gospel of Christ which you will be able to handle, which fits your personality. God will use you in your own unique circumstances, just as he will use me in mine. This is the great value of Christian diversity. We are not all alike.

You may have been a teacher who has laid burdens in evangelism on people which have been too difficult to bear. If so, then repent of this. But I beg you not to go to the other extreme of giving your people the impression that they don't ever have to speak to people about Jesus.

If you are a person who is fearful speaking about Jesus because you will lose your friends or in some way lose your popularity, please repent of that and take heed of the strong warning of the Lord Jesus in Mark 8:38:

"For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."

We have all felt like this at different times. We are all frightened of rejection.

For several years I taught a course at the Sydney Missionary and Bible College. Each year, I had the students write out the testimony of how they came to Christ. What always gave me pleasure as I read these testimonies was to see how many of the students had been led to Christ by the faithful witness of their godly friends. These friends had lived the Christian life, prayed for them and spoken to them

about their need to turn to Christ. In most cases, they were ordinary Christians (if that isn't an oxymoron). They were not professionals. As a writer of evangelistic books and an 'evangelist', I was equally shaken by how few came to Christ by either of these routes!

It is good to remember that when the Lord Jesus called his disciples, he said, "I will make you become fishers of men" (Mark 1:17).

If you are a follower, you will be a fisher too. **B**

ENDNOTE

1. Notably Peter O'Brien in 'The Great Commission of Matthew 28:18-20', *Evangelical Review of Theology* 2, 1978, pp. 254-67.

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