

ACTS 1:8b. (EHV)

“You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

The mind of God has always been occupied from eternity with one great thought: having humans dwell in fellowship with him forever in heaven. Even if Adam and Eve had never sinned, God did not have it in mind for them to dwell on earth forever. Jesus tells us that heaven is a kingdom that has been prepared for humans from the very foundation of the world (Matt. 25:34).

This one great thought has been burning such a hole in God’s mind that he would not dismiss it even when humankind rebelled against him and fell into sin. No, he would move heaven and earth, he would in fact bring heaven down to earth in the person of his one and only Son, Jesus the Christ, in order to make sure that this one great thought would not remain merely a thought, but would be a reality.

Brothers and sisters, this one great thought is the reason why you are here this morning. It is the reason why you were baptized. It is the reason why you have been instructed in God’s word. It is the reason why Jesus has given you his very body and blood. It is the reason why you came into being exactly when you did, why you live exactly where you live. God wants *you* to dwell in fellowship with him forever in heaven.

But he doesn’t just want it for you. In our selfishness, it’s easy for you and me to come up with any number of reasons why God would want you and me in heaven above all. But God wants everyone you have ever laid eyes on and everyone else to dwell in fellowship with him forever in heaven exactly as much as he wants it for you and me. And actually there is no good reason he wants any of us. He wants all of us not because of who we are, but in spite of who we are. He wants all of us purely because of his grace in Jesus Christ.

There are some who are already set to dwell there—all those who believe in Jesus as their Savior from sin. But there are many, many more who are not believers, and God desperately wants them to be. And guess whose task it is to do their best to communicate this one great thought not just to those who already know it and believe it, but also to those who do not?

It is ours, friends. It is the task of believers, and no one else’s. This is the task called evangelism, the task of spreading the good news of Jesus Christ. This is the task we want to focus on for the final sermon in our Christian Doctrine series.

1. The Necessity of Evangelism

First, we need to see the necessity of evangelism, the necessity of telling people about what Jesus has done for them. It is necessary because God wants all people to be saved. The apostle Paul wrote to Timothy, “God our Savior...wants all people to be saved and to come to know the truth” (1 Tim. 2:3–4). The apostle Peter wrote, “[The Lord] is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance” (2 Pet. 3:9b). The Lord told the prophet Ezekiel to tell the people, “As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live” (Ezek. 33:11).

Evangelism is necessary because God has made provision for all people to be saved by sending his Son to fulfill his holy law for all people and to atone for all their sins. John the

Baptist said of Jesus, “Look, the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). And John the apostle wrote that Jesus “is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world” (1 John 2:2).

Evangelism is necessary because we only benefit from that provision through faith in Jesus. “Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned,” Jesus told his disciples (Mark 16:16). And he told Nicodemus, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life” (John 3:16). The apostle Peter told the Jewish leaders, “Salvation is found in no one else [but Jesus], for there is no other name under heaven given to humans by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12).

And evangelism is necessary because we only receive faith in Jesus through the good news about Jesus. The apostle Paul quoted the prophet Joel when he said, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” But then he went on to ask, “How, then, can they call on the one whom they have not believed in?” They can’t. “And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard?” They can’t. “And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?” They can’t. “And how can they preach unless they are sent?” They can’t. He then concludes, “Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ” (Rom. 10:13–15, 17).

In order for the one great thought of God to become reality for people, those people need to hear about the one great thought of God, and how that thought has been put into effect through his Son, Jesus Christ.

2. The Agents of Evangelism

So, who is to do this? We just heard from Paul that this is the special job of those who have been specifically sent to preach. Here too in Acts, when Jesus said, “You will be my witnesses,” he was speaking first and foremost to his apostles. So we think especially of pastors and missionaries today.

But the Bible also makes it clear that spreading the gospel is the task of everyone who knows and believes the gospel. Peter tells us that we are a people belonging to God that we “may declare the praises of him who called [us] out of darkness into his wonderful light” (1 Pet. 2:9), and later he says that all of us ought to be ready and able to share the reason for the hope that we have (3:15). It is to his disciples that Jesus gave the command, “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” If we are disciples of Jesus, then we share in the responsibility of sharing the gospel of Jesus.

3. The Results of Evangelism

Is this gospel always going to have the desired effect when we share it? No. Jesus’s parable of the man who goes out to sow some seed is meant to illustrate what happens when we share the gospel. He tells us that some seed will fall on the hard path and will never take root. Some will fall on rocky soil, where it does take root and springs up quickly, but just as quickly fades away when trouble and persecution come. Some will fall among the thorns, where it will also take root, but eventually get choked out by other earthly priorities, pleasures, and attractions.

Jesus isn't trying to give us a strict percentage, but it is interesting to note that three out of the four places the seed falls result in an unfavorable outcome.

But—some seed also does fall on good soil and bears fruit a hundred, sixty, or thirty times what was sown. When you're occupied with sowing the seed of God's word, there will always be some who will receive the message, take it to heart, believe it, and put it into practice.

Katie and I used to have a golden retriever named Gerhardt. In some ways, Jesus's command to us to share the gospel is like when I used to command Gerhardt to get into the vehicle. When Gerhardt knew my wife and I were going out to the vehicle, he began to whimper and whine. If we had decided that he would in fact be coming along, we would open the door for him and he would rush out the door and out to the vehicle, where he would start circling excitedly and resume his whimpering and whining. Finally I would open the back door of our vehicle and I'd give him the command, "Up!" And usually the command was only implied, because he was already up and in before I could say anything.

Why was he so eager to fulfill that command? Sometimes we would just go on shopping errands, and he would stay in the vehicle the whole time. Occasionally we would go out to eat or go to a movie, and he would be in there for a couple hours or even longer. One time we went to a wedding in the city where my parents live. So he spent a couple hours alone in my parents' house, and then we went to the reception in a city more than half an hour away and he spent the entire time in the vehicle. Yet it was still the same story afterwards: The next time I let him out into the garage and opened up the vehicle door and told him to jump in, he would do so with bright eyes and wagging tail. Why?

Because sometimes, friends, sometimes we went for a walk or a hike and he got to run in the woods. Sometimes we even went to a lake and he got to swim. And those comparatively few times, and the happiness and satisfaction they gave him, provided him with all the motivation he needed to obey my command to get in the vehicle every single time.

Those comparatively few times... Brothers and sisters, you might get told to shut up and you might get some funny or accusatory looks and you might get laughed at and called names and you might not be everyone's favorite person, but those comparatively few times that your words about Jesus have the desired impact on someone and save a soul—those times make everything else worth it. So when Jesus says, "Go and make disciples," we're already out the door—out the bedroom door to share it with our families and children, out the house door to share it with friends, coworkers, and other acquaintances.

4. Ways to Evangelize

And how do we share the gospel of Jesus? There are a number of ways.

The first and primary way that often gets overlooked is by entering a godly marriage, having kids, and bringing them up in the Christian faith. No matter what else my dad and mom have done or might do, they brought eight souls into Christ's church that weren't there before, just by being Christian parents. They converted eight souls—how many pastors can honestly say they have done that, apart from baptizing infants (which wouldn't happen if it weren't for the parents)? On Pentecost, Peter first said, "The promise is for you and for your children," and only then did he say, "and for all who are far off" (Acts 2:39).

Second, Peter tells us to be ready to give an answer to everyone who asks us to give the reason for the hope that we have. Of course that implies that people will notice that there is hope in you. I was reading about the Christian church in the 100s AD the other day. It was a period in which the Church spread rapidly. The book noted that this evangelism was done by ordinary Christians. “We know of no missionary societies; we hear nothing of organized effort. Wherever Christians went doing their regular tasks, the pagan saw a different kind of individual and heard the rumors about ‘the Savior.’” What if people could tell that the one gas station employee, who happened to be the one Christian, was the happiest and best worker, because she saw in her welcoming customers, or helping customers find something, or ringing up their purchases, or stocking shelves, or helping her coworkers, or cleaning up at the end of the day, or graciously fixing a purchase she rang up incorrectly—if she saw in all of it the opportunity to glorify her Savior and serve her fellow human beings by giving them food and helping them on their travels—instead of just doing the minimum to get through work? What if people saw that same spirit in all of you, no matter what your job or responsibility is? Well, someone might just ask you to give the reason for the hope that is in you, and you will have a chance to talk about your Savior.

Paul tells us that Jesus gave some to be evangelists and pastors and teachers. Especially you young men might consider whether God has given you the ability to train to become a pastor or a teacher or a missionary. You young women might consider whether God has given you the ability to train to become a teacher of young people in one of any number of schools in our synod. We have a shortage of both pastors and teachers right now; consider whether you might be an answer to the many prayers to fill those positions. And you young men and women and older men and women might consider whether God has given you the ability to teach Sunday School or Vacation Bible School.

Whether or not we ourselves are able to serve as professional, representative workers, Jesus also told his disciples to pray for such workers, which is something we all can do.

As we talked about last week, we can of course support existing gospel ministry with our offerings, and also with our encouragement. Perhaps ask our Sunday School teachers from time to time, “Is there anything you need that I could perhaps get for you or help you with?” Or just take the time to thank them for their work. One of the ways we already do this work of supporting is through the scholarship money we send to our seminary. Read the thank-you letters from the seminarians on our bulletin board sometime.

If you think there’s nothing you can do as an individual or nothing we can do as a congregation, friends, let me tell you a true story. There was a man who lived in the 1800s by the name of Louis Harms. He grew up in a Christian household and was incredibly intelligent. His brother once remarked that Louis could read a poem twenty pages long one time and then repeat it word for word. He learned to speak Latin like a native tongue. He would sometimes write down in Greek what someone else was reciting in Hebrew. He was a genius. But he eventually elevated his learning and education above the God who gave it to him. He became an atheist, denying the very existence of God for a time while attending a university.

But one time, probably because his studies required him to, he was reading John 17:3, where Jesus was praying to his heavenly Father, “Now this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.” Those words rekindled faith in Louis’s heart, and he now poured his heart and soul into becoming a pastor.

Eventually he was ordained to be a pastor in the small country town of Hermannsburg in northern Germany at age 36. His passion for sharing the gospel caught on, and he was able to start a mission school in that small town, where young men could train to be missionaries. He himself said that many of his members shook their heads at the school and said, “What will our stupid farm boys accomplish as missionaries?” But he said, “We trusted in the living God and [we] knew our...farm boys.”

Those young men poured themselves into their exacting studies and eventually passed their examinations and were ready to serve. But there was a problem. They had no way to get to their intended destinations. The graduates weren't able to book passage on merchant vessels, and other mission societies wouldn't allow them to travel on board their ships. Louis was on the point of despair when a Christian sailor asked him, “Why don't you just build your own ship?”

At first Louis dismissed the idea, but eventually he asked himself, “If God had Noah build a ship that big with no help other than from his three sons, can't we build a ship to his glory for the salvation of souls that's only one fifth as large as Noah's ark?”

Now keep in mind again that Hermannsburg was just a small country town, and it wasn't on the sea. In fact, it was well over fifty miles away from a navigable river connected to the sea. Not to mention that Louis estimated that he would need \$13,000 to build the ship. Nevertheless, once Louis planted the idea in the hearts of his people, before any official campaign or pledge drive was begun, he quickly raised \$19,000 for the building of the ship. It was built on the river, named the *Candace*, put out to sea with his graduates, and it took them safely to their destination where they began a mission among the Zulus in Africa. Over the next twenty years the ship made fifteen voyages in all and was then sold for \$5,000.

Brothers and sisters, the question is *never* one of ability or means. The question is: Do we understand the necessity of the work? Are we earnest in prayer for the work? Do we know the gospel itself? Do we believe it?

And what is that gospel, friends? That's where this Christian Doctrine series needs to end. The gospel is not just, “God loves you.” The gospel is not just, “You're not alone,” or, “There's someone to help you in your struggles.” Those truths all come with the gospel, but they are not the kernel of the gospel. The gospel is that there are only two roads and every single person is traveling on one of those two roads. Every last one of us is conceived and born as a wretched sinner, on the road headed straight for hell. But God loved us wretched sinners and would not have it that we perish. So he sent his Son Jesus to fulfill his holy law for us and to pay for all of our sins—not just so that we could be pretty sure of salvation, but so that we could be 100% confident that in Jesus we stand holy and righteous before God and will inherit eternal life. And he gave us that faith, that confidence, through Word and sacrament. That is the gospel. The gospel is that the one great thought of God isn't just a thought, but a saving reality for all those who believe that it's true.

Jesus died for all of your sins. Jesus died for the sins of the whole world. Now—

Find someone who's on that other hellbound road, and reach out and get them on your heavenly road. Tell them about Jesus, your Savior and theirs.

Amen.