

Peter's Perspective on Persecution "The Evangelistic Edge to Suffering"

Passages: 1 Peter 3:8–17
 Matthew 5:38–48

Over the years, evangelism has got an increasingly bad name. Many people think of evangelism as a type of “sales and marketing”. The word “evangelism” conjures up images of pushy ‘know-it-alls’ who can’t wait to go door-knocking to share their version of “good news” with unsuspecting neighbours. It’s no wonder why, when normal Christians here the word “evangelism”, they start to shudder! As Becky Pippert remarks in her book, “Out of the Saltshaker”, evangelism “is something you wouldn’t want to do to your dog, much less a person like you.”

The problem, however, is not with evangelism. Rather, the problem is with our false understanding of evangelism. The paradigm that has dominated much of 20th century evangelism was modelled on a “salesman-style” approach. Going door-to-door with our product (Jesus) and a memorised speech was exactly what any other salesman would do! And, every time we went out, we felt as if we failed unless we could “close the deal” and get someone to pray the sinner’s prayer.

It is this old paradigm that now stands as a barrier to evangelism today. We can’t shake off the feeling that, in order to evangelise, we need to be extroverted, persuasive, and an expert in convincing people to take what we’re offering. It’s no wonder I hear Christians say to me, “I could never do evangelism! I don’t like being pushy. I avoid conflict. I don’t have the personality for it!”

But is this really evangelism? Is this what the Bible commends us to do?

Let’s pray.

What is evangelism? In what ways are we to share the Good News of Jesus Christ with the world?

In the Apostle Peter's mind, there is no hint of salesman paradigm. In today's passage from 1 Peter 3, Peter says that the best way to evangelise people is not to "blow them away" with our convincing arguments, but to simply "**baffle them**"; baffle them until they can't help but ask you questions!

In verse 15, Peter writes these words: "**Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.**" Although the word, "evangelism", isn't used here, this is essentially what Peter is talking about. In fact, the Greek word Peter uses here is "apologia", from which we get the word "apologetics". ("**Always be prepared to give an apologia to everyone who asks you...**") According to Peter, there's a simple pattern to how evangelism happens. First, you must live in a way that attracts people and arouses their curiosity. Then, when people ask you why you live in such an unusual way, you can give your "apologia", or explanation.

I was watching my favourite TV show (Grand Designs) the other day. A couple had built a house using an old concrete water tower. Although the communal spaces were on the ground floor, in a different building, all the bedrooms were up in this tower—and each had amazing views of the countryside. Since the house was so unusual (and so cool) the kids were constantly being asked by their friends if they could come over and play. It seems they were curiously attracted to this strange life inside a water tower.

Similarly, says Peter, people will be attracted to your strange life and the unusual way that you live. And when they ask you if they can come over...let them in!

Of course, this idea prompts a whole new set of questions in our minds. You see, no longer are we asking about evangelistic techniques or whether we have the needed personality to "sell" Jesus to the world. Now, we have to ask the more difficult question of whether our lifestyle is any different to that of our pagan neighbours? I mean, **do we baffle anybody?** Are people asking any questions about the hope that we have? Or, do our lives look just like everyone else's?

Perhaps we need to go back to Peter and ask his advice on how (as Christians) our lives should look in order to prompt those baffling questions amongst neighbours and friends that will open up non-threatening, unsalesman-like conversations about Jesus?

Starting with verse 8, Peter gives us three ways to baffle the world:

First, baffle them with **the bond of love** that you share with other believers!

In **1 Peter 3:8**, Peter writes:

⁸ Finally, all of you, be like-minded, be sympathetic, love one another, be compassionate and humble.

It seems to me that, in the Bible, God is more concerned with raising up witnessing communities than He is with raising up witnessing individuals. Our old sales model of evangelism makes us believe it's up to each of us as individuals to win the world to Christ. But the Bible says that it's the love found in the Body of Christ that is meant to have an evangelistic impact. Jesus said, **"By this shall all people know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."** This is true because the Gospel is, primarily, the Good News of reconciliation—how God brings us to Himself and supernaturally helps us to overcome the barriers we have with others. In Peter's mind, the sight of a truly loving community will be the first thing that will baffle your neighbours and friends, forcing them to ask the questions that will lead to evangelistic discussions.

The second way that Peter wants his readers to baffle their pagan neighbours is by **blessing** them; even those who have wronged you! Look at verses 9–12.

⁹ Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult. On the contrary, repay evil with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing. ¹⁰ For, "Whoever would love life and see good days must keep their tongue from evil and their lips from deceitful speech. ¹¹ They must turn from evil and do good; they must seek peace and pursue it. ¹² For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their prayer, but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil."

Of course, this is something we know so little about today. I mean, has anyone done you evil recently because you are a Christian? It's rare! And has anyone ever insulted you because you are a Christian? Again, it's rare! That's mainly because our culture has become so 'nice'...so 'Christianised'...that most people try to live in a 'christian' way. Indeed, nowadays, Christian behaviour has gained mainstream acceptance. But I wonder, as our culture changes, if our Christian differences will begin to stand out more and more. Could the gap widen so much that we might have to bless our persecutors like they did in Peter's day? Is a day coming when Christian behaviour will begin to baffle the world around us once again?

The third way that Peter wants his readers to baffle their pagan neighbours is through the **boldness** they exhibit in the face of danger. Look at verses 13–15.

¹³ Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good? ¹⁴ But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. “Do not fear their threats; do not be frightened.” ¹⁵ But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord.

Of course, this statement was made in a world where Christians were becoming an easy target of the state and the scapegoats for all sorts of issues. If anything was going wrong in the social sphere, the Christians were often blamed for their so-called “foreign religion”. Indeed, despite the **bond** of love they exhibited towards each other and the way they **blessed** the outside world, they still got into trouble. That's where **boldness** needed to come in—to stand firm without fear, knowing that Christ, the Lord of the universe, would uphold them and their cause and, in the end, bring His justice to bear.

It's interesting, particularly when you think of Peter's background! Wasn't Peter the same man who, out of fear, denied Jesus three times? But something changed when the Holy Spirit came upon him at Pentecost! In fact, it was this boldness that really made Peter (and all the early Christians) stand out. It was this boldness in the face of such physical danger that caused many people to ask questions of the Christians. “Why aren't you afraid? How can you be so bold? What is the secret of your confidence in the face of death?” These sorts of questions would always lead into a

perfect evangelistic opportunity, even as they do today in many parts of the world where Christians are still persecuted.

In fact, once you get the gist of Peter's understanding of evangelism as a response to questions raised by the Christian lifestyle (which flows from the hope we have in Christ's resurrection), you will quickly see why Peter doesn't necessarily see persecution as always a bad thing! Sure, it's painful; and sure, we may feel forsaken and alone! But there are benefits...tangible benefits... which, in the long run, will baffle the world around us.

Indeed, Peter goes so far as to say, in verse 17, that **"It is far better, if it is God's will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil."** Why is it better? Because, people will take no notice of you when you suffer for doing evil. After all, that's what you deserve! **But**, when you suffer for doing good, people will be baffled! And when they are baffled, you can be sure that God will use their curiosity to ask questions...questions that will lead to an opportunity to **"...give the reason for the hope that you have."**

Of course, when baffled people ask questions, they don't want an answer that is condescending or critical. What they want (and what they need) is an answer that is gentle and which respects their own circumstances and ignorance. This answer ultimately needs to point to the hope we have in Jesus and why Jesus makes us **bond** (so deeply with other Christians), **bleed** (those who hurt us) and so **bold** in our convictions.

At this point, we come back to where we started...with verses 15 and 16. Taken as a whole, Peter says, **"Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, ¹⁶ keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behaviour in Christ may be ashamed of their slander."**

Your life in Christ, says Peter, is meant to be an evangelistic statement, empowered by God's Spirit to baffle...to arouse the curiosity of a watching world! So, walk prayerfully! We are not door-to-door salespeople! We are meant to be a light to the world; a city on a hill which attracts the world to Jesus.

Today, we are going to baptise 10 people in the Georges' River. Today, these 10 people are going to go down into the waters of Christ's death and be raised up again in Christ's resurrection. By

doing so, they are publically declaring that they are committed to being His witnesses to the ends of the earth...to be ambassadors of His Good News; mouthpieces of His Gospel and showcases of His glory!

I only ask these 10 candidates to do one thing-- In their hearts, may they **“set apart Jesus Christ as Lord, always prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks them to give the reason for the hope that they have!”**

Let's pray.