

2 Corinthians 4:1-6 “A Commitment to God-Centered Evangelism”***

Main Idea: The fifth mark of a healthy church is a commitment to God-centered evangelism. We’re going to consider an example of what this is from 2 Corinthians 4:1-6, and then we’ll consider eight implications.

I. God-centered evangelism: Let’s consider an example in 2 Corinthians 4:1-6.

- A. It takes a mercy-focus (1).
- B. It takes a refusal to use methods that manipulate (2a).
- C. It takes a commitment to keep presenting the truth (2b).
 - 1. Our aim is to stir man’s conscience, not just his emotions.
 - 2. Our ambition is God’s approval.
- D. It takes a proper understanding of the problem (3-4).
 - 1. People are perishing.
 - 2. People are blind.
- E. It takes preaching the Lordship of Jesus Christ (5).
 - 1. We must see ourselves as slaves.
 - 2. We must do all we can to make our Master known.
- F. It takes a miracle of creation (6).
 - 1. God must turn on the light.
 - 2. When He does, a sinner begins to see and love Christ.

II. God-centered evangelism: Let’s consider some implications.

- A. Our mission is to make disciples, not just get decisions.
- B. Our message must be our focus, not our methods.
- C. We must think rightly about numbers.
- D. We must build redemptive relationships with lost people.
- E. We must take world missions seriously.
- F. We must remember that election makes evangelism possible.

The Bottom Line: We must keep looking up and out, not just in and around.

We have a God-given mission as a church. It’s called world evangelization. “In your going, make disciples of all nations,” said Jesus in Matthew 28:19. “As the Father sent me, so I am sending you,” He said in John 20:21. “And you will be my witnesses...to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8).”

But how do we fulfill this mission of world evangelization? Churches answer that question in lots of different ways.

Back in 1960 Joseph Bayly wrote an insightful little narrative called *The Gospel Blimp*. It’s sort of a humorous indictment of what evangelical churches have done to fulfill our God-given mission. Here’s the plot summary:

George and Ethel are concerned about the salvation of their next-door neighbors, but don't know how to reach them with the good news of Jesus Christ. During an evening get-together of George and Ethel's Christian friends, everyone is captivated by the sight of a blimp flying overhead. Then Herm gets a bright idea: why not use a blimp to proclaim the Christian message to the unchurched citizens of Middletown? The group incorporates, buys a used blimp, hires a pilot, then commences to evangelize their hometown by towing Bible-verse banners, 'firebombing' folks below with gospel tracts, and broadcasting Christian music and programs over loudspeakers. But a series of misadventures puts the blimp ministry in jeopardy. And George becomes increasingly uneasy about the methods and business practices of International Gospel Blimps Incorporated and its "Commander", Herm. Do the personal sacrifices made by the group's members

*** Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

justify the results? And will George and Ethel's next-door neighbors ever receive the gospel message?¹

I can identify with George and Ethel, can't you? How are we going to reach our next door neighbors with the gospel? They resorted to a gospel blimp. How are we going to do it? That brings us to the fifth mark of a healthy church.

We're taking time this Fall to identify from the Scriptures nine marks of a healthy church. We're seeking to answer the question, "What are we all about at WBC?" What makes us tick? What do we value?

We started with *expository preaching*. That's the first mark of healthy church. It means that when we gather as a church, we gather to open and expose God's Word. Not to hear human opinion, but to study the Bible so that we might know and love its Author. That's why we spend so much time with our Bibles open at this church.

The second mark is *biblical theology*. That answers the question, which part of the Bible deserves our attention? We need *all* of it. We are committed to teaching the whole counsel of God's Word. Biblical theology means we teach the whole Bible, and when we're teaching any part of it we do so with the whole Bible in mind. That's why we stress the importance of studying the Bible at this church. We come to church, not just to *feel* something, but to *learn* something, for when we learn great truth about God we then have the capacity to feel great appreciation for God.

The third mark is *a commitment to the gospel*. We exist because of what God did for us. He sent His own Son into the world on a rescue mission. His lived a perfect life, died as a substitute for sinners on the cross, paid sin's penalty, and then rose from the dead in triumph on the third day. That message defines who we are. We are saved people, and our salvation depends on what God did for us, apart from anything we have done for Him. So at this church, when we gather together it's to celebrate God and what He did for us. Sure, it's great to see each other, but the center of attraction here is God Himself. It's not about us. It's all about Him. We exist for the glory of God.

Last time we considered the fourth mark, *a commitment to God-centered conversion*. That means we believe that God is the author of salvation from start to finish. We looked at Ephesians 2 which reminds us of the sinner's condition. He is dead, deluded, and doomed. There's nothing he can do to change his standing with God, even if he desired, which he doesn't. But God, in His amazing love, goes after sinners, raises them from the dead, and gives them new life in Christ! He not only made salvation possible, but He makes it happen too. God grants the sinner new birth, and God grants the sinner the faith that's necessary for salvation. That's why we don't use emotional stories and music to "get decisions" at WBC. The sinner's need needs far more than to "make a decision for Christ." He needs for God to give him a new heart that wants to believe in Christ, and will then want to live for Him.

That brings us to the fifth mark of a healthy church, a commitment to *God-centered evangelism*. We're going to consider an example of what this is from 2 Corinthians 4:1-6, and then we'll consider eight practical implications.

I. God-centered evangelism: Let's consider an example in 2 Corinthians 4:1-6.

The apostle Paul wrote this letter to a church that had broken his heart. He led them to Christ and nurtured them in their spiritual infancy, but as they moved to toddlerhood, they turned against their spiritual father. Some false teachers said he was in

¹ <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0312733/plotsummary>

the ministry for personal gain, that he dipped into the offering and took some of the money they had collected for the famine-stricken believers in Jerusalem, that he wasn't really an apostle, and that he couldn't be trusted. And sadly, many of the church members believed those lies and turned sour towards Paul.

As much as he hated to talk about himself (he'd much rather talk about Christ), Paul became very autobiographical in this letter. For the sake of the church, he had to defend himself lest the false teachers completely demolish God's work in Corinth. So in 2 Corinthians Paul opened up his heart and defended his ministry, sharing why he ministered, how he ministered, and what he experienced in the ministry.

When we come to our text in 2 Corinthians 4, we're coming to a very helpful passage. It's the passage I chose for the first sermon delivered in this building in 1990. It's perhaps the passage that most clearly reveals Paul's approach to evangelism, his *God-centered* approach to evangelism. What does it take to fulfill our mission? Based on Paul's example, six essentials.

A. It takes a mercy-focus (1). "Therefore, since through God's mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart."

We have a ministry. It's the ministry of the new covenant. Paul was an apostle. I'm not an apostle, but I participate in the ministry of the new covenant. That's your calling too if you know Christ. "He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant," says Paul in 2 Corinthians 3:6.

Why do we have this ministry? We certainly don't deserve it. Indeed, we don't deserve the privilege of knowing Christ, let alone telling others about Him. The truth is, we would not be God's children, let alone His ministers, if it were not for this attribute of God. Since through God's *mercy*, we have this ministry.

Last week a man in the community called me to talk about the tragic death of a pastor in our community. As we finished our conversation he said to me, "I don't think most people have any idea what a pastor faces day after day, the challenges, the expectations, the demands. I guess that's why nobody should ever be a pastor unless he's called to it."

I'll be transparent. There's a heart battle that goes along with being in the ministry. As a shepherd you pour your life into people, month after month, year after year, but you know the day may come when those very sheep may end up leaving you to go look for greener grass. They may even question your motives and turn against you and even attack your ministry. And that's just what those who profess Christ may do.

What keeps the minister going? You say, "The encouragement of the faithful. That's the motivation of the minister." Yes, it is a blessing to receive the encouragement of the faithful, but it's not enough. You need something else, and you have it. What?

Notice the end of the verse, and then work backwards. Paul concludes, "We do not lose heart." In the KJV, "we faint not." We don't quit. Paul had many reasons to throw in the towel, and the Corinthian defection was yet another thorn in his heart, but he kept going. What motivated him? This did. He kept remembering *the mercy of God*.

Since through *God's mercy* we have this ministry, we do *not lose heart*. This is what keeps us going in our ministries, my friends, no matter what we may be facing. That's true of your ministry with your kids, parents, or your Sunday School class, or your outreach to your unsaved neighbors or classmates. If we're going to fulfill our mission of reaching people for Christ, it takes a mercy-focus.

How could I ever give up on people that hurt me? No one has ever done anything to me that even begins to compare with what I did to God. He gave me life, and I used

that life to live for myself and hurt Him deeply. I broke His laws, and He kept causing the sun to shine on me. I ignored Him, slighted Him, tried to use Him, demeaned His glory, questioned His goodness, and defied His right to rule my life.

And what did He do to me? He poured out His mercy on me in countless ways. He gave me loving parents that took me to a church where I learned of His loving Son. He chose to punish His own Son on the cross so that He might forgive me and make me part of His forever family. And then He gave me His Spirit, blessed me with a spiritual gift, and called me into a ministry He tailor-made for me to fulfill.

A few days ago a young man asked me, “Does God ever give up on people? I was just wondering because I’ve done some pretty bad things in my life.” I’m so thankful I could tell that young man about God’s mercy.

Friends, I stand here today because of God’s mercy. I’m in the ministry because of God’s mercy. I’m not losing heart today because of God’s mercy. Friends, if we take our eyes off of divine mercy, we’ll never make it. If we’re going to fulfill our God-given ministries, it takes a mercy-focus. That’s essential #1. Here’s #2.

B. It takes a refusal to use methods that manipulate (2a). “Rather, we have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God.”

The critics said Paul was a manipulator. No way, says Paul. He refused to do anything that would upstage the glory of the gospel.

He said he *renounced secret and shameful ways*. “Underhanded ways” is how the ESV puts it. A preacher can do that, you know. He can do underhanded things to get his audience to respond.

Have you ever heard of “rice Christians”? The term refers to people in the Far East who “became Christians” just so they could get the rice the missionaries promised them. We have “rice Christians” in America too. Preachers promise health and wealth to listeners, if only they will trust Christ (and often, send a few dollars to the preacher!). That’s an *underhanded way* to reach people.

There are other ways too. A church has a softball team. Could be a good idea. Great way to have some fellowship. The church team joins a church league, and the league rules stipulate the players must belong to your church. Your neighbor, Bill, is a great shortstop. Problem is, Bill isn’t a Christian, let alone a member of your church. So you invite Bill to a practice, tell him you’d love to have him play in your league, if only he’d “get saved and join the church.” So you tell him how great your church is, how good it would be for his family, and about all the fun you have in your Sunday School class. And as a result, because Bill loves sports, his kids, and having a good time, Bill tells you, “Sure, sounds good. Count me in.” And so the next Sunday Bill walks the aisle, prays the sinner’s prayer, gets baptized, and joins the church. A Christian? No, a rice Christian.

Friends, it’s not evangelism merely to invite people to church. And it’s certainly not God-centered evangelism to use rice or softball or anything else to get people to add Christ to their lives. If Christ isn’t enough, if people need something else besides Christ as incentive to follow Christian, then there’s reason to question whether they truly know Christ. And once the rice is gone, you’ll see.

I’m not saying that people haven’t come to know Christ that way. I am saying that Paul refused to use manipulation. He refused to *distort the word of God*, “to tamper with God’s Word,” says the ESV. He didn’t try to trick people, to bait and switch them into a response. That was out of the question for him.

What was his approach? He tells us at the end of verse 2, “On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to every man’s conscience in the sight of God.” There’s how God-centered evangelism works, essential #3...

C. It takes a commitment to keep presenting the truth (2b). Not methods, but a message. That’s what the Spirit of God uses to transform a sinner. I don’t use methods of manipulation, says Paul, but rather, I keep putting the truth of God’s Word in front of people.

Billy Graham was once speaking to a group of pastors in England and acknowledged that if he had his ministry to do all over again, he’d do two things differently. One, he’d spend more time studying and less time preaching. And two, he’d spend more time praying.²

Donald Grey Barnhouse, a well known pastor and Bible teacher from a generation ago, once said, “If I was going to have only three years in which to minister, I’d study and prepare for two of them.”³

Why this emphasis on *study*? Because you can’t present truth you don’t know, and you can’t present truth well if you don’t know it well, and you won’t know it well if you don’t study it. As Paul told Timothy, “Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth (2 Tim. 2:15 KJV).”

Brothers and sisters, when it comes to evangelism, let’s remember two things.

1. *Our aim is to stir man’s conscience, not just his emotions.* “To every man’s conscience,” says Paul. That’s what we’re after. The sinner has a God-given conscience, and our aim is to stir it. How? With scare tactics? No. Music? No. You might get his attention that way, but if you’re going to touch his conscience, you need a different surgical tool, and the tool is the truth. And not just truth in general, but *gospel truth*, as Paul emphasizes in verse 3.

But what if he mocks the message we share? He may. So we need to settle this...

2. *Our ambition is God’s approval.* It was for Paul. Hear him again, “We commend ourselves to every man’s conscience *in the sight of God.*” There’s the audience Paul sought to please, an audience of One. And so for us. If we’re going to do God-centered evangelism, we must present the truth to men, yes, but all the while we do so *in the sight of God.* It’s God’s assessment that matters most to us.

If you don’t settle that, you’ll not tell people the truth they need to hear. Friends, the message we share contains bad news before the good news, and we must not shrink from sharing the bad news. I told a man who came to see me, “Your problem is a whole lot worse than you thought, and the solution is a whole lot better than you could ever imagine. It’s worse because it’s not just you that’s dissatisfied with your life, but God. He is offended by your disobedience. But He’s provided a way for your forgiveness by sending His Son to pay sin’s penalty. Are you interested in hearing more?”

That brings us to a fourth essential. If we’re going to fulfill our mission...

D. It takes a proper understanding of the problem (3-4). “And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.”

² As told by John Stott, *Between Two Worlds*.

³ As told by John Stott, *Between Two Worlds*.

If we don't get this, we won't engage in God-centered evangelism as we ought. The reason we need to do evangelism is because there's a problem. What's the problem? It's this.

1. *People are perishing.* And...

2. *People are blind.* Those are the words Paul used. Our gospel is veiled to those who are *perishing*, and those who are perishing are *blinded* by the god of this age.

That's the predicament of the non-Christian that sits next to you in class, or at work. And of the one that lives next to you, or perhaps lives with you. He is *perishing*, a term that means he's under the sentence of destruction. He is one heartbeat away from the fire of hell. But he's also *blind*, which means he doesn't see that he's under the sentence of destruction.

Here's why you're not going to argue someone into the family of God. Or scare him in. Or tug at his emotions and get him in. His problem is too big for such surfacy tactics. Friends, that lost person is perishing and blind.

And not just blind, but *blinded*. There's an ongoing blinding agent at work in his life that Paul identifies as "the god of this age." The devil has blinded, not eyes, but the *minds* of lost people so that they cannot see the light of the gospel you're sharing with them. That's why when you share Christ with them, they see the words on the page, but they can't see them. Their minds are blinded.

So how are they ever going to see Christ's beauty and believe in Him? There's only one way, as Paul will tell us in verse 6. They don't just need light. They need the ability to see the light. Which means they need a *miracle* to occur.

We'll talk about what they need in a moment, but for now, let's talk about what we need. If that's man's condition, then in our evangelism we need to refuse to do anything that would minimize man's problem.

Suppose we found a homeless man lying on the street, started talking to him, and found out he was a high school drop out, jobless, and addicted to crack. Suppose we felt bad about his condition, so we took him to Bob Evans for a nice meal, then bought him some new clothes, housed him, educated him, and trained him for a job. Those would be significant changes. But something fundamental still hasn't changed about this man. He is still perishing and blind. He still under the wrath of God and still cannot see the beauty of the only One who can rescue Him, the very person who gave him life, a mind that could get an education, and hands that can work his new job. That's his problem. And we must never forget it.

What's the solution for his problem? Essential #5 of our mission...

E. It takes preaching the Lordship of Jesus Christ (5). "For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake."

We don't *preach ourselves*. That's not what our friend needs from us, not advice based on how we raised our kids or got our act together. We preach *Jesus Christ*. But not just general truth about a generic Jesus. We preach Jesus Christ *as Lord*. Jesus is not only option on the religious shelf. He is the Creator and Commander of the universe and to believe in Him is to submit your life to Him. And we preach *ourselves your servants* (Greek *doulos*, 'slaves') *for Jesus' sake*. That's our role in evangelism.

1. *We must see ourselves as slaves.* And...

2. *We must do all we can to make our Master known.*

One of the greatest works of music ever produced is Handel's *Messiah*. It's been said that Handel composed the classic in just twenty-two days, and during that time he

would scarcely consent to eat or sleep. A person who is conscious of a great task can accomplish great things.

And we have an even greater task. We have an assignment that will effect where and how people will spend their eternity. Our role? We must see ourselves as slaves. Whose slaves? Christ's? Yes, but also the slaves of lost people. *Ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake*. We must do all we can to make our Master known to those who are perishing and blind.

But how will they ever see? Element #6...

F. It takes a miracle of creation (6). “For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.”

Paul goes back to the creation account to illustrate what must happen in order for a sinner to be saved. Remember, the sinner is blind. You share the truth of Christ with him, but he can't see it. His only hope?

1. *God must turn on the light.* Just like God turned on the light at creation, and darkness fled, so God must do for the sinner. Until God says, “Let there be light,” the sinner won't see the Christ you're presenting. But when He does...

2. *When He does, a sinner begins to see and love Christ.* That's why I use the phrase *God-centered evangelism*. Evangelism means we tell the good news—that's our assignment. *God-centered evangelism* means we tell the good news in God-honoring, God-dependent, God-expectant ways, for God alone can produce the miracle we're after.

And friends, it is a miracle, a miracle of creation. We're not simply trying to get people to make a decision for Christ. They can't do that. They're blind. They need a miracle from God so that they will see the Savior and embrace Him as their Lord and Rescuer.

So there are the elements of God-centered evangelism, as modeled by Paul. If we're going to fulfill our mission, it takes a mercy-focus, a refusal to use methods that manipulate, a commitment to keep presenting the truth, a proper understanding of the problem, preaching the Lordship of Jesus Christ, and a miracle of creation.

Now let's talk implications.

II. God-centered evangelism: Let's consider some implications.

If we follow in Paul's footsteps, there are things we will do and *not* do in our evangelistic efforts as a church. Let's start here...

A. Our mission is to make disciples, not just get decisions. Many churches are highly *decisional*. Their church services are structured to “get decisions.” The highlight of the day is the “altar call” when people are urged to walk an aisle and “make a decision for Christ” or “for baptism” or “for church membership” or “for rededication.” At WBC we don't deny that our mission involves calling for decisions, and if you are here today and have never been saved, you need to trust Christ, get baptized, and join the church. But the decisional approach misses the mark.

In the Great Commission, Jesus told us to *make disciples* (Matt. 28:19), not just get decisions. And He told us how to make disciples, too, by “baptizing them” and then “teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you.”

Many churches have what they call “revival” meetings, some yearly some twice a year. We don't typically, and I want to talk about why. Often behind the revival approach is a mindset, a philosophy of ministry that's very decisional. You need to make

a decision for Christ, so we'll structure it right into our calendar. Every Sunday morning we preach salvation messages to get people to make decisions for Christ. The Sunday morning focus is clearly on the lost person. The message is "evangelistic," and the Christians just listen passively to a message they don't need (since they've already "made a decision for Christ").

The problem is, Christians that don't get fed get weak and sickly and struggle with life. So, every six months or so, the church offers special revival meetings to get the Christians back on track again. And they often use special music to attract people and create a climate for more decision-making. And since decisions wear off or get lost in the shuffle of cluttered lives, they give more opportunity to renew those decisions in six months. The result is often a roller-coaster approach to the Christian life, up the aisle and back down again, up and down.

I'm not against the idea of having special meetings from time to time. But often the very revival methodology confuses the issue of what our mission is. Jesus told us to *make disciples*. So every week we're supposed to gather, not to preach evangelistic sermons to non-Christians, but to edify the saints through meaty expository preaching, so the saints can then go out and do evangelism, and reach the lost for Christ.

B. Our message must be our focus, not our methods. Listen to Paul again, "By setting forth the truth plainly." That's how he did evangelism, and so must we. It's not about our methods, but our message. We need to look for ways to make the message known.

And so we have a pregnancy care center ministry. Why? To make Christ known to women in difficult life circumstances. We have an English class for our Chinese friends. Why? To create opportunities to make the message of Christ known. We offer free biblical counseling. Why? So we can share the gospel of Christ with hurting people.

In terms of personal evangelism, I recommend taking people through the Gospel of John, one chapter per week. Looking back, I recall with great delight how the Lord used weekly, one on one times in John's Gospel to produce faith in Ken and Dara, John, Steve, Nicole, and others.

C. We must think rightly about numbers. Do we want to grow as a church? Yes! Because God has people in this community that He purposes to save. We're not a holy huddle. God forbid that we come to church and get content with just seeing our friends.

Do you realize that there are only about 30 people at WBC who were here just 25 years ago? I'm thankful for those who ministered in the past with the future in mind. This is not *your* church, nor *mine*. It is the Lord's. Our assignment, and it is a privileged assignment, is to work with Him so that new people are saved and added to this and other churches. That means there's no room for protecting our turf at WBC. Or our pews. Can a visitor sit in your seat? I hope you'll offer it to him or her, and then invite for a meal after the service.

So yes, numbers matter, for numbers represent people. But numbers must not drive us. Are we more successful just because we've had higher attendance in the past two months? No. A church can do all kinds of things to increase numbers, and many do. But that doesn't mean the growth is *God-centered* and God-pleasing.

D. We must build redemptive relationships with lost people. Sometimes I'll be asked, "When do you do evangelism as a church?" Usually the person wants to know what program we're using—Thursday evening visitation, evangelism explosion, etc. My response? Redemptive relationships. That's our bread and butter when it comes to

evangelism. We encourage you as a church to build relationships with lost people, where you work, where you go school, where you shop, where you live. Work at having a relationship with that lost person, a *redemptive* relationship. That means your goal isn't just to have another friend, but to befriend that person so you might share the message of Christ with him.

But our evangelism assignment isn't just for those we see. It's for those we'll never see. Which is why...

E. We must take world missions seriously. "To the ends of the earth." That's what Jesus said. Not just your lost neighbor across the street, but the lost billions around the world.

Ever heard of Robert Woodruff? Even if you haven't, nearly all of us have been affected by his vision. Mr. Woodruff was the president of Coca Cola from 1923 to 1955 and he had the audacity to declare during WWII, "We will see that every man in uniform gets a bottle of Coca Cola for 5 cents wherever he is and whatever it costs." And when the war ended he went on to say that in his lifetime he wanted everyone in the world to have a taste of Coca Cola. Woodruff kept his personal creed in life right on his desk, "There is no limit to what a man can do or where he can go if he doesn't mind who gets the credit."

It's amazing what happened because one man set his gaze on the world. Can we do less? We're not talking about a soft drink. We're talking about the glory of God and the eternity destiny of seven billion people.

The world has more than doubled in my life time, from 3 billion in 1961 to 7 billion in 2011. We presently support around twenty missionaries, but friends, the need for us as a church to embrace world missions is greater than ever. We need some who will go. We need all to pray and to give.

F. We must remember that election makes evangelism possible. That's what Paul said in 2 Timothy 2:10, "Therefore I endure everything [like persecution and prison] for the sake of the elect, that they too may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus." We can do evangelism with confidence. Why? Because we know God has chosen a people that He guarantees He will bring to Himself. And He privileges us to work with Him to that end.

The bottom line is this. As a church that's committed to God-centered evangelism, we must keep looking *up and out*, not just *in and around*. *Up*—it's all about Him, so let's do it ways that exalt Him. And *out*—we need to see the lost that are out there. Not just *in and around*—God forbid that we would view our church as our own little country club. This is a training ground for mobilizing the troops, a hospital for the sick, a refuge for the lost. Let's go!