

# EVANGELISTS AND EVANGELISM

“And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ,” [Ephesians 4:11-13](#)

Because prophets are the most prominent ministry in the Old Testament and apostles are the most prominent in the New, we have a wealth of scriptural insight into their gifting and calling. However, this is not the case with the evangelist. We must, therefore, be diligent to glean what we can from Scripture about this essential ministry. At the same time, the relatively limited amount of biblical definition and instruction allows us a degree of liberty in exploring how this ministry might function to its fullest in the Church.

## WHAT ARE EVANGELISTS?

The English word *evangelist* comes from the Greek *euangelistes*, which appears only three times in Scripture: in [Acts 21:8](#), where Philip is specifically named an evangelist; in [Ephesians 4:11](#), where it is listed among the gifts of the risen Christ; and in [2 Timothy 4:5](#), where Timothy is instructed by Paul to “do the work of an evangelist.” However, there are two other closely associated and more frequently appearing Greek words that share the same root meaning, and which will help us to gain an understanding of the role of the evangelist.

**1. EUANGELION** — This Greek word appears 77 times in the New Testament. It literally means “a message of good,” and is most often translated “gospel” or “good news.” It is from *euangelion* that we draw the term *evangelism* to refer to the mission of proclaiming the gospel, though it should be pointed out that the word *evangelism* is not found in most English Bibles. When *euangelion* is used in Scripture, the content of the “message of good” is quite varied and includes the Kingdom of God, the life and ministry of Jesus, the grace of God, truth and salvation, life and immortality, resurrection from the dead, and the future judgment of the wicked and rest for the righteous.



**2. EUANGELIZO** — This Greek word appears 55 times in the New Testament, and from it we get our English verb *evangelize*. It literally means “a proclaiming of that which is good” and in most translations it is rendered “to preach the gospel.” There are multiple individuals and groups in the New Testament who are specifically named as “proclaiming that which is good,” including angels, John the Baptist, many of the apostles, Philip, and of course Jesus himself.

Again, the “good” proclaimed in the New Testament varies and includes hope for the poor and sick, the coming birth of Jesus, the Kingdom of God, future judgment of the wicked and rest for the righteous, Jesus and His resurrection to life, peace with God through Christ Jesus, the word of the Lord, the faith and love of the saints, the mystery of God’s eternal will, justification through faith, and the nations blessed in Abraham.

So, from the above we can conclude that an evangelist is “a messenger of good.” As with the word *apostle*, *evangelist* is introduced to us in the New Testament but was already a familiar word at that time, albeit not as a religious term. In the first century Greek world, it was used quite generally for messengers bearing any good news. However, it is interesting to note that in a military context (from which Paul often drew analogies), the term had a very specific application. When a military campaign had been won, a particularly swift soldier would be sent out to herald the message of the good news of victory to all he encountered. This soldier would be known as an evangelist.

## AN EPHESIANS 4 EVANGELIST

With the great emphasis in Scripture on the mission of preaching the gospel, it is surprising to many that there is only one individual who is specifically called an evangelist in Scripture, namely Philip. However, as we look closely at his example, we find that there is a lot we can learn from him.

### PHILIP: SPIRIT-FILLED SERVANT

We first encounter Philip in [Acts 6:5](#), where he is selected as one of the seven men (commonly thought of as deacons) to serve in practical ways to allow the apostles to concentrate on prayer and the ministry of the Word. This tells us two very important things that were evident in Philip prior to the emerging of his evangelistic ministry. He was servant-hearted, and he was full of wisdom and the Holy Spirit, as this was the requirement for those to be chosen ([Acts 6:3](#)).

### PHILIP: PIONEERING WITH POWER

Before His ascension, Jesus said to his disciples in [Acts 1:8](#), “**you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.**” It was only following the terrible but wonderful martyrdom of Stephen, and because of the subsequent persecution of the Church in Jerusalem, that believers did start to fulfill the wider aspect of this commission. Philip is recorded as among the first to break out of Jerusalem, pioneering new territory and functioning with great power:

“Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed to them the Christ. And the crowds with one accord paid attention to what was being said by Philip, when they heard him and saw the signs that he did. For unclean spirits, crying out with a loud voice, came out of many who had them, and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed.” [Acts 8:5-7](#)

This wasn’t just a case of advancing the gospel geographically but also ethnically, taking it beyond the Jews to the Samaritans, who were of mixed Israelite and Gentile blood. Directly following this, we find Philip used by God in the first recorded Gentile conversion, that of the Ethiopian eunuch ([Acts 8:26-38](#)).

## PHILIP: PARTNERED WITH APOSTLES

It is fascinating to note that despite the extraordinary power in which Philip moved, it required the apostolic ministry of Peter and John to bring the newly-converted Samaritans into the foundationally vital experience of the infilling of the Holy Spirit:

“Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent to them Peter and John, who came down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit, for he had not yet fallen on any of them, but they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then they laid their hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit.” [Acts 8:14-17](#)

It is also interesting to see that this was followed by the exposing and confronting of Simon the Sorcerer, whose wrong motives had gone unchallenged prior to apostolic involvement.

All of this demonstrates a remarkable openness and understanding on Philip’s part as he willingly partners with the apostles. As we saw with prophets, evangelists will only build effectively when working in this context.

## PHILIP: HOME AND FAMILY

Philip makes one last appearance in Scripture some twenty years on from the events in [Acts 8](#). In [Acts 21:8-9](#), we find him (by this time referred to as “Philip the evangelist”) hosting Paul and his team at his house in Caesarea, and we learn that he has four prophetic daughters. It is greatly encouraging to see that Philip had clearly remained true to and been recognized in his calling, and had become established in a local community where he had raised a family noteworthy in their passion and gifting in God. There is much modern evangelists might learn by following Philip’s example in this regard.

## EVANGELISTS TODAY

When you think *evangelist*, what impressions come to mind? There are many differing thoughts on this ministry today, sadly not all positive. For many, a shining example of evangelistic ministry is Billy Graham, who for decades was anointed by God with an extraordinary reaping ministry. However, others may find showier but less appealing images coming to mind: white suits, tanned faces, strange hairstyles, etc.

Whether positive or negative, the stereotype of the evangelist preaching to the masses has caused many to miss a more biblical understanding of this ministry. Even on a more local level, there are often characteristics that seem to be associated with evangelists that can be unhelpful. For example, it is often assumed that all evangelists need to be raving extroverts or natural sales people. In fact, it is the naturally timid Timothy who is exhorted by Paul to “do the work of an evangelist” in [2 Timothy 4:5](#).

However, evangelists are typically gripped with a passion for the lost that in most cases exceeds that of the average church leader, thus causing them to feel restricted and stifled in regular church life. This has led to many breaking out of the perceived inflexibility of the Church and into independent ministry or “para-church” organizations. The focused zeal of such organizations can result in them being very fruitful, particularly over the short term, but their tendency to be one-dimensional and the absence of other Ephesians 4 gifts renders them tremendously prone to imbalance and ultimate collapse.

Our passion is to see the evangelist restored to effective functioning in the local church. For this to happen, we need to be missionary-minded enough that someone with an overriding concern to see people born again feels most at home in the Church. So, let us consider further what exactly the role of the evangelist is in the local church.

## WHAT DO EVANGELISTS DO?

**1. PREACH THE GOSPEL** — For evangelists, the task is clear and simple: to proclaim the gospel of God’s grace. This is, of course, something that all believers are called to do, but evangelists are especially gifted in proclaiming the gospel (whether on a personal or public level) in such a way that people are brought to faith in Christ as a result. If apostles and prophets are primarily given to outworking the visionary foundation for the spiritual building, it is evangelists that work at the quarry-face, blasting stones from the rock with which to build. Their lives reflect their passion—they will rarely miss, and usually create, opportunities to proclaim the gospel, typically bearing much fruit. Simply stated, people get born again when evangelists speak!

**2. EQUIP THE CHURCH** — We must not, however, make the mistake of concluding that the evangelist’s role is to do our evangelism for us! According to [Ephesians 4](#), evangelists were not given primarily to the world of lost humanity but to the Church, to help it be conformed to the likeness of Christ. He is the ultimate Evangelist ([Luke 4:18](#)), and evangelists are specifically given to see the missional aspect of Jesus evident and functioning in the Church. In their calling “**to equip the saints for the work of ministry**” ([Ephesians 4:12](#)), their ministry will be one of stirring everyone to reach out with the gospel, and stimulating all of us into action by their own example and enthusiasm. Genuine evangelistic gifting is wonderfully contagious, and many reaping skills can be taught (or perhaps we could more accurately say, “caught”) in time spent with evangelists. Evangelists also tend to be both pragmatic and strategic, and God will often give them insight regarding how the entire Church can become more effective in its interaction with the world.

## BEING AN EVANGELISTIC PEOPLE

“You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.” [Matthew 5:14-16](#)

The Church’s mandate to impact the world with the gospel of God’s grace is yet another aspect of His unchanging but unfolding purpose for His people. Throughout the Old Testament, we see His desire to have a people who were distinct and set apart, but who because of this were able to manifest His nature and represent Him in the earth. God’s word speaks repeatedly of the light of His salvation shining on and through His people, and the prophet Isaiah in particular declares God’s intention for His people to be this light to the Gentiles:

“...It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth.” [Isaiah 49:6 \(NIV 1984\)](#)

Of course, Jesus came as the ultimate embodiment of God’s light in the world (see [John 1:4 & 9](#)). However, it is interesting that He said, “*As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.*” ([John 9:5](#)) and, as we see from [Matthew 5:14-16](#), His followers inherit this nature and role from Him. Evangelism is as much about who God has made us to be as what He has called us to do. Nevertheless, as Jesus also makes clear, that light is seen as we step out in obedience to God’s word.

“...‘THE HARVEST IS PLENTIFUL, BUT THE LABORERS ARE FEW; THEREFORE PRAY EARNESTLY TO THE LORD OF THE HARVEST TO SEND OUT LABORERS INTO HIS HARVEST.’”

[Matthew 9:37-38](#)



## GROWING IN EVANGELISM

### THE STARTING POINT—PRAYER

“Then he said to his disciples, ‘The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.’” [Matthew 9:37-38](#)

Our impulsive reaction to the challenge to become more evangelistic can be frenzied activity that, sadly, is often fruitless. The command of the Lord in light of the waiting harvest is that we pray for Him to send out laborers. The harvest will be brought in as His laborers go where He wants them to go and do what He wants them to do. This requires that we seek His direction, listen for His voice, and be led by His Spirit to pray in accordance with His will. The first thing we must do, therefore, is pray, and that is what we must continue to do. If we omit it, or pay mere lip service to it, we will ultimately be disappointed.

### WINNING SOULS

People have sometimes referred to leading people to Christ as “winning souls.” The term is taken from [Proverbs 11:30 \(NIV 1984\)](#), which says, “**he who wins souls is wise.**” In fact, this scripture is referring to winning someone’s heart and trust rather than to conversion, but it does have something to say to us on the subject of evangelism. The apostle Paul was very intentional about connecting with people to create a bridge for the gospel. He says in [1 Corinthians 9:22b-23](#), “**I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.**”

There are steps we can take to cultivate openness in people to receive the gospel. Evangelists are all gifted in varying degrees with this soul-winning ability, but through the leading of the Holy Spirit, we can all grow in this area. A frequently overlooked factor in winning the hearts of unbelievers is simply listening to and truly hearing what they are saying. When we do this, we earn the right to speak into their lives, and we learn things (from what they say and from what the Spirit is also telling us) that will help us to be relevant in what we communicate.

### DEMONSTRATING THE GOSPEL

Another key factor in preparing people to receive the gospel is demonstrating the love, kindness, and mercy of God. It has been said that Christians are to be good news before they share good news. Jesus said, “**In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven**” ([Matthew 5:16](#)). He has actually prepared these good works in advance for us:

“**For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.**” [Ephesians 2:10](#)

In [Acts 2:47](#), we are told that the newly-birthed church in Jerusalem experienced “**favor with all the people.**” It is reasonable to assume that this is because the people saw—and benefitted from—their goodness, and this no doubt contributed to the daily growth of the church.

### PROCLAIMING THE GOSPEL

“...‘everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.’ How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?” [Romans 10:13-14](#)

Good works are important as a demonstration of the gospel, but they are not a substitute for proclaiming it. God has commanded that His good news is to be spoken forth, and though we may not consider ourselves to be particularly articulate or persuasive, we can have confidence that there is power in the message itself:

“For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes...”

Romans 1:16

## POWER EVANGELISM

“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.’” Matthew 28:18-20

This text, known as “The Great Commission,” is possibly the best-known exhortation to evangelism, but it is rare that much attention is given to the opening and closing statements: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me” and “I am with you always, to the end of the age.” His authority and His presence are to be tangible factors in our evangelism, and are experienced as the Holy Spirit, who empowers us to be witnesses (Acts 1:8), equips us for every situation with, for example, words of knowledge and wisdom, prophecy, gifts of healings, and miracles. As previously noted, Paul was very aware of the importance of this dynamic:

“...Paul and Barnabas spent considerable time there, speaking boldly for the Lord, who confirmed the message of his grace by enabling them to do miraculous signs and wonders.” Acts 14:3 (NIV 1984)

“My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit’s power, so that your faith might not rest on men’s wisdom, but on God’s power.” 1 Corinthians 2:4-5 (NIV 1984)

## THE PURPOSE OF THE GATHERED CHURCH

As evangelism is so much a part of what we are called to do (not just to reach a lost world but also for the maturing of the saints), there is a risk that it can become the entire focus of the Church—an objective to which many an evangelist is unashamedly given! The danger in this is that the gatherings of the “called out ones” become increasingly geared towards unbelievers and away from the worship of God and the maturing of the saints, which happens through teaching and the functioning of the gifts of the Spirit. The emphasis shifts from a “go and tell” to a “come and see” mentality, and the church meeting, rather than the world, becomes the forum for the preaching of the gospel. This approach is absent from the New Testament, where the gospel was preached in, for example, the Temple Courts, the synagogues, Solomon’s Colonnade, the Halls of Tyrannus, the Temple in Athens, Mars Hill, and most significantly house to house.

The clearest insight we have into the nature and purpose of church meetings comes from Paul’s instructive first letter to the Corinthians. Here, we see a highly charged and extremely charismatic environment which, although needing guidance, was in no way discouraged by Paul. Rather than advocating a gearing of the meeting towards unbelievers, Paul merely addresses the potential scenario of how any unbeliever who may turn up is likely to react:

“But if an unbeliever or someone who does not understand comes in while everybody is prophesying, he will be convinced by all that he is a sinner and will be judged by all, and the secrets of his heart will be laid bare. So he will fall down and worship God, exclaiming, ‘God is really among you!’” 1 Corinthians 14:24-25 (NIV 1984)

This is a far cry from the modern tendency to structure and “tone down” our entire gatherings for the comfort of unbelievers.

## THE ULTIMATE GOAL OF EVANGELISM

In his excellent book on missions, *Let the Nations be Glad*, John Piper makes the following profound and provoking statements:

*“All of history is moving toward one great goal, the white-hot worship of God and His Son among all the peoples of the earth. Missions is not that goal. It is the means. And for that reason it is the second greatest human activity in the world.”*

*“Missions is not the ultimate goal of the Church. Worship is. Missions exists because worship doesn’t. Worship is ultimate, not missions, because God is ultimate, not man.”*

It is, therefore, our fervent and continuous prayer that, by the grace of God, we will continue to develop evangelistically without losing anything of our passion for corporate worship and functioning in the gifts of the Spirit. The biblical key to this development is the emerging of Ephesians 4 evangelists, so let us continue to beseech Jesus to give them to the Church, while personally accepting the apostolic challenge to “do the work of an evangelist” (2 Timothy 4:5). Who knows how many might find that God has gifted them in this respect beyond what they have asked or imagined!

## RECOMMENDED READING

1. *Let the Nations Be Glad!* by John Piper
2. *Evangelism & the Sovereignty of God* by J. I. Packer
3. *Invading Secular Space: Strategies for Tomorrow’s Church* by Martin Robinson & Dwight Smith
4. *Divine Appointments* by Larry Tomczak
5. *The Greatness of the Great Commission* by Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr.

