

The Great Commission Means Sharing Christ's Story, Not Yours

Evangelicals love a good story. We're all about "sharing our testimonies" and "telling our stories" and recounting our "spiritual journey."

This emphasis on personal experience is one of evangelicalism's strengths. We understand conversion as more than mere assent to Christianity's teaching and more than mere observance of rites and rituals associated with the church. It's no wonder that sharing our stories is a main aspect of evangelical identity and evangelistic activity.

But there's a subtle danger lurking here. Because of our emphasis on conversion stories and testimonies, we can unintentionally make people think that evangelism is the same thing as sharing your experience.

We interpret The Great Commission's "Go make disciples" as "Go tell your story." They are not the same thing.

Here's why...

Jesus and the Great Commission

When most of us think of the "Great Commission," we start with the word "go." The gist of Christ's command is that we are to go into all the world and make disciples of all nations, baptizing and teaching, right?

But Matthew's version of the Commissioning scene doesn't start with "go." The commission itself is sandwiched between two statements related to Jesus Christ: the first concerns His authority, and the second concerns His empowering presence.

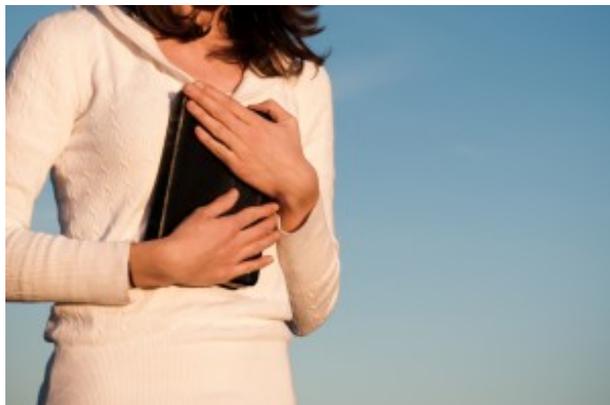
The flow of the passage goes like this:

- All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Jesus.
- Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations...
- Jesus promises to always be with His people.

Luke's commissioning scene gets at this same truth in a different way. For Luke, the focus is on the gospel going out in Jesus' name.

- The Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms point to Jesus, whose death and resurrection fulfills Old Testament prophecy.
- Witnesses will proclaim a message of repentance and forgiveness of sins.
- This message is proclaimed "in Jesus' name" to all nations.

For Luke, the name of Jesus is the source of authority. In Acts, this element is not emphasized in the commissioning scene itself, but in the rest of the narrative, where the theme of Jesus' name carrying power and authority becomes a major point of the story.



3 Elements of Genuine Christian Witness

Both Luke and Matthew infuse their commissioning scenes with christological truth. So, how did the apostles, under the authority of Jesus, witness to the truth? Notice three elements:

1. The events at the heart of the gospel are at the heart of their proclamation. The sermons in Acts reveal how the apostles walked their hearers through the story of Christ's life, death, and resurrection.
2. They are witnesses to the character of Jesus in the way they pattern their ministry after his miracles and show his compassion to those in need.
3. They are witnesses to their own Christian experience. The Apostle Paul, for example, recounts his conversion experience on two occasions in Acts (22:6–21 and 26:12–23).

What About Now?

So what does this mean for us today?

1. The events of the gospel – Christ's life, death, and resurrection – must be at the heart of our proclamation.
2. What we do should also witness to Christ as we follow His example.
3. Our conversion experiences should back up our gospel proclamation.

If we get these out of sync, we hinder our effectiveness in fulfilling the Great Commission.

For example, some Christians may focus so much on the second aspect (what we do) that they fail to verbally proclaim the gospel (what Christ has done).

Another example: some Christians focus so much on the third aspect (our conversion experience) that they fail to properly proclaim Christ's life and work.

Let's look at this second danger a little more closely.

Christ's Work in History vs. Christ's Work in Your Life

The meaning of the word "witnesses" in Luke 24 and Acts 1, as well as throughout the narrative of Acts, refers to those who witnessed the work of the Lord and spoke of it to others. The witness of the disciples was centered on Christ's life and work, most clearly seen in his death and resurrection.

So, let's take note: *the focus of apostolic preaching in Acts is not on the conversion experiences of the disciples, but on the work of Christ that makes conversion necessary.* For this reason, we should ensure that our testimony of Christ's work focuses primarily on what Christ did in history, not merely what Christ has done in our life.

The Place for Personal Testimony

That said, there is a place for personal conversion testimonies. After all, Paul appealed to his experience when testifying to his uniqueness as an apostle. The Samaritan woman ran into town and told of her conversation with Jesus. The man born blind, after being healed by Jesus, went and told everyone what had happened to him.

Don't hear me saying that we should stop giving personal testimonies! They are powerful.

We should work, however, to make sure these testimonies undergird and support the clear gospel message and don't somehow replace it. What Jesus has done *for me* should always be connected to what Jesus *has done*, period.

What Happens When Personal Testimony Takes Over

Focusing primarily on our own experiences with Christ can unintentionally downplay the importance of the historic events upon which the Christian faith stands or falls.

An evangelist who speaks only of his personal experience with Jesus may be surprised to encounter others who speak just as genuinely of their personal experiences in Islam, Buddhism, or Hinduism. The initial desire to speak of what one has experienced personally may run into the rocks of multiculturalism, leading to a neutered presentation of the gospel that loses its basis in historical reality.

The role of personal experience in testifying to the work of Christ should be seen as a further evidence of the power of the gospel. It is *not* the gospel itself, but it testifies to its power.

To sum up: **gospel presentations that include personal testimonies should take care to emphasize the gospel itself (the news of Christ's death and resurrection), not merely our personal experiences of life transformation.** A change of heart is a further demonstration of the gospel and should be used in personal evangelism, as long as the focus remains on Christ's objective work on the cross.

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