

Evangelism in the City

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In this series we're looking at ten or so different aspects of what it means to be the church and how to embody them in a vibrant yet historic way. This morning we are looking at *evangelism*. Now, to some evangelism is a very off-putting word, and there are good reasons for feeling this way. To other's it's a very exciting word, and there are good reasons to be excited. What I'd like to do this morning is get underneath how *we feel* about evangelism to grasp what Jesus feels, and what Jesus *thinks*, to a *thoughtful* evangelism.

Compassion for the Decentered Self

To many, evangelism is a power word, a way for religious people to dominate others with their spiritual beliefs. Many religious people are fanatical and coercive about their beliefs, treating people like projects to be completed, boxes to check. Jesus, however, had a non-oppressive approach to evangelism. This doesn't mean he never debated or encountered rejection, but it does mean that he was able to talk about his beliefs in a respectful way. Many pluralists are unable to do this. When someone says to you, "It doesn't matter what you believe, as long as it's true for you. All roads lead to heaven." This is incredibly disrespectful because it brushes aside other beliefs in one fell swoop. Pluralism says, with absolute force, my way of all-paths-lead-to-one-God is right. Your paths, Islam, Christianity, Judaism, are all wrong. Pluralism is dismissive of people's age-old, hard won, heartfelt beliefs, insisting we fall in line with its intolerant doctrine of many ways. So pluralists, atheists & Christians are often guilty on the same charge of dominating disrespect. What makes Jesus different? His *motivation*. Preaching and teaching the gospel in cities, Jesus did evangelism with compassion: "[When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd](#)" (Matt 9:37). The word is *splanchnizomai*. It's got a bit of onomatopoeia; it means from the bowels. Today we'd say "he felt it in the gut." It's not a surface emotion; it's a deep feeling. Jesus had a gut check when he looked out on a morass of people made in his image. He *felt* for them. Why? *Because* they were "harrassed and helpless." How? Well, these words don't do it justice. They are aggressive words. One commentator translates them "mangled and thrown to the ground." What makes the people so oppressed? It's probably a combination of things. The Jews were under the oppressive rule of the Romans, who were enforcing thier own beliefs and culture onto the Jewish way of life. You could put the legalistic Pharisees in this camp also, who put big, oppressive law-keeping burdens on them. They were beat up, extorted, and abused by Roman ideology, the Pax Romana, which offered very little true peace. But Jesus comes preaching the gospel of peace. He wants to lift the burdens of heavy ideology and burdensome religion, and unlike Rome, he doesn't look out on the multitudes as sheep to be slaughtered or dominated but as sheep without a shepherd. *Jesus' evangelism was motivated by compassion*. And ours should be too. I'd like to show why you can be motivated by compassion. Today, there's a new Rome, if you will, and there are forces that have so dominated us that we are mangled and thrown to the ground. They are largely invisible. The first is the notion of the **modern Self**. The modern Self is the Super-man. He is autonomous, decisive. Like Captain Nemo of 20,000 Leagues Under the Sea, he is the captain of his own ship, braving new worlds in his underwater paradise, utterly self-reliant.

The modern Self is the Bond of the 20th century, dashing, self-possessed, dominating evil and women alike. It is a self-reliant, self-centered spirit sparked by the Renaissance, and led to some positive things like liberal democracy instead of oppressive monarchies. Napoleon vs. Lincoln. But it also led to colonialism, where the US exploited other countries for their wealth and land. The idea that we are in charge of our manifest destiny. Then the ambitious, conquering Self took economic form in corporations and megabrands exploiting the American public. Anyone worthwhile had to have shoes with a namebrand logo, drive particular cars, and wear shirts with little horses on them, calling us to elitism. The **postmodern thinkers** came along and rejected all of this. They said the autonomous self is a modern fiction, and it is a recent development in the West. The East conceives of the self as radically communal. They went further, pulling the rug out from under our feet to say that there is no true Self. Everything is subjective, no fixed truth, no fixed identity. The bottom drops out. Instead of Superman we got the Dark Knight; Instead of Sean Connery we got Daniel Craig and Jason Bourne, conflicted heroes searching for identity. In one fell swoop, identity went from confident to doubting, assertive to divided. The result is an inundation of *many* possible identities with no central thing defining the Self. How does this work out? Life becomes a masquerade ball, only we change masks many times a day. To some we are the risky party animal, others the successful professional, the doting mother, the hip single, the thoughtful reader, the indie music expert, the caring husband, the justice crusader, the uber blogger, the pietistic Christian, the fashion expert, the start-up genius, and on and on. *There is no essential me; I can become whatever I construct myself to be.* Life becomes a carnival: fun, distracting, and constantly changing. We reinvent gender, sex, and ourselves: Bruce Jenner. Christians adjust their morality and beliefs based on who's around. We don't bat an eye at divorce rate, comfortable with sexual sin, questionable TV & film, entertaining gossip because we are too busy being relevant. Tempted to find meaning in many identities. Capitalism jumps on the bandwagon and exploits us with «indie» everything. Indie music, organic food, vegan subculture, hipster fashion, niche shopping for headphones and phone covers that no one else has. While the center is not holding, people are crumbling. Confused, hopeless, mangled identity, thrown to the ground. In their most recent record, *After the Disco*, Broken Bells articulates our identity crisis: [Oh, London Moon / Help me stumble home / Let me lose myself along the way / I've got nothing left / It's kind of wonderful / Cause there's nothing they can take away... away / The open doors left me wanting more / But it's another way to win a useless fight / You've been lying so long don't know when you're faking.](#) The decentered Self is so harassed and helpless, so dominated that it is *lost* and most don't even realize it. There is no true self, so there's nothing left to take away. We've been lying so long we don't even know we are faking. Open-mindedness has closed the door on definite meaning, and we're left wanting more. Bruce Jenner, Brian Williams, you, me...cause for compassion, to preach the hope of a fixed identity.

Christ Integrates the Self

Jesus looks out and sees sheep without a Shepherd, people without an identity, and he doubles over, then doubles up to restore the decentered Self. How? By [“teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction”](#) (35). Teaching *and* healing, preaching *and* power. The modern Self was all

teaching and no healing. The decentered Self all healing no truth. Jesus proclaims a message of liberating truth and holistic healing. He does it by preaching the gospel of the Kingdom. The kingdom of God is the rule and reign of God in Christ. Jesus says to us, If you want your identity restored, you have to throw off your many masks, discard the modern, autonomous Self. And embrace a king. Because you're not a good one. Only I am fit to rule, but when I do you'll get straightened out; you'll humanity will be *restored*. As King, Jesus overthrows the domineering powers to make way for new identities: beloved son, accepted daughter, new creation. Just give up on your selves and give in to me, follow me, live in my ways. I will never change my opinion of you. You will always be mine, loved, adored, cherished...but you must give up your petty identities. This is exactly what the gospel offers, big identity in Christ. Remember the Tardis, bigger on the inside that it looks on the outside? Take **adoption**, beloved son. Some of you have very little idea what that means. Your father was absent at best. You're like **James**. When I met him he was clearly depressed, a dark cloud followed him everywhere he went. As we developed a friendship, he shared that he had been rejected as a child, his mom giving him up for adoption. He tried to find meaning in work, travel, and people. Eventually he found his birth mother, but she favored his older brother. She had her own issues and couldn't give James the love he was seeking. Now he was addicted to meth, didn't want to feel anything. As I listened to him, I kept praying, asking God to give me good news for James. Then in a moment of despairing hope, James cried out I want my faith back! I looked him in the eye and told him the story of the prodigal son, how the father, seeing the son coming, didn't cross his arms and shake his finger, but ran towards him with arms wide open. Clothed him and threw him a party. I then looked at James, with tears streaming down his face, and said: The Father is telling you its time to come home, James. He loves you and forgives you. He fell into my chest and wept like a baby for joy. James needed new, enduring identity of adopted and beloved Son. The gospel of adoption. If you listen to people's stories closely enough, and ask enough questions, you'll be able to connect the good news to their bad news, to show them a better identity in Christ. Weeks later James died of viral meningitis. His mother tracked me down in the hospital hall, and with tears asked, Did James ever forgive me? She was looking for forgiven daughter, the gospel of **redemption**. I have a friend who is pretty connected in the start-up world, has gained respect and some success. He befriended an entrepreneur who, from the outside had it all... a multi-million dollar exit from a tech start-up, wife, kids. One day he introduced my friend to some other start-up guys as "the most peaceful person I've ever met." Many professionals are frantically looking for acceptance in their success—from peers, heroes, even from themselves. But my friend finds it in Jesus, and it shows, the gospel of **justification**—that God accepts us perfectly in Christ. And he shares that gospel with his colleagues. The multidimensional gospel of the kingdom offers so much more than the moldable self. New identity in Jesus is better than autonomous identity in Self. So how does he do it? How can Christ guarantee what we've missed? Preaching...and power. Truth...and healing, but not power like we expect. *As he looks out on the sheep without a shepherd, the shepherd determines to lay down his life for the sheep. The risen King becomes the Lamb who was slain.* The Shepherd becomes the bleating sheep, slain for the sin of the world. You see, our multifarious identity making, our masquerade of immorality, our proud autonomous Self, is so offensive, so polar opposite of the order of kingdom, that it has to be remade to make it into the kingdom, *and there is cost to remake*

us. This is true of any major endeavor. If you want to take the company in a new direction, people are fired, budgets slashed, new monies allocated for the different direction. How much more on a cosmic-divine scale? The cost of going in a new direction is immense. In order for your identity to be recentered it has to be reoriented around your Maker. The cost for going in the wrong direction is death to the old self, slashing the budget of the modern, self-reliant identity, and to do that we need a compassionate Shepherd to wrap up all our evil, all our petty substitutes, our imposter kings, and takes them down to the grave, down to the death. King and Savior, truth and power, preaching and healing, Jesus overthrows sin, death, and evil through *the unexpected act* of his own death and resurrection to make all things new, even us, to put us right. This is the gospel of the kingdom and it liberates us from the masquerade and the me. Everyone needs this good news, a message from Heaven, to transform earth. See how harassed and helpless we are, Jesus gives everything for nothing to transform all things. But we must respond, throw off fleeting identities, seek his forgiving reign. Only then can the Self be restored, find dignity and love, under his reign and in his grace.

The New Self for a New City

Now we can see, through the eyes of Jesus, that compassion motivates evangelism. Jesus feels and Jesus thinks about us, so much that offers a gospel of the kingdom, addressing all our surrogate identities with different and better gospel identities. And he wants His compassion to extend through the generations, across cultures, and into cities. How? Through us. He says “[the harvest is plentiful the laborers are few.](#)” This can sound oppressive, cutting things down to eat them, but this is not Jesus’ intention. In fact, harvest was a time of great joy and celebration in agrarian societies! The harvest was precious not exploited. Jesus wants us to go out into an exploited, deconstructed culture and bring them the good news of the rescuing, dignifying, empowering gospel of grace. A true disciple can’t keep the good news to himself; he must share it. How? Truth and power, evangelism and prayer. Jesus says, “[Pray to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers.](#)” Pray. Why? Because God has the power. At this point Jesus only had 12 to bear the good news, so he says therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest. How many do we have? 200-250? The 12 turned the world upside down. What if took the identity liberating news of Jesus, sheep and Shepherd, into our cities? Imagine what would happen to our city if more and more people got a new Self? The city would be reordered socially, spiritually, and culturally with the gospel of Jesus. Pray, oh yes, pray but go, go with the good news of the kingdom.