

OF SNAKES AND DOVES: Using Our Heads and Following Christ's Heart in Evangelism

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The calls into preaching ministry had been made and accepted. The classes had been taken and the lessons had been learned. The huge, open-air sermons and healing sessions had been witnessed. Now it was time for these seminarians – faculty of one; student body of twelve – to go on their own preaching missions. The disciples had heard their Master's solemn request for prayer: "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field" (Mt 9:37,38). They realized that Jesus had appointed them to be an answer to this prayer when he gave them authority to perform miracles and to preach the urgent message of a kingdom of heaven that was at hand (Mt 10: 7,8). They yearned for instruction in this missionary endeavor, and Jesus did not disappoint. Some of those instructions must have seemed quite ominous. One wonders if the apostles' heads were spinning when the Great Commissioner sent them out with predictions of floggings and arrests and sword (Mt 10:17,19,34). On the other hand, some of those missionary instructions must have been quite comforting. Predictions of God's provision through the welcome of like-minded believers put a spring in the Twelve's step (Mt 10:9,10,30, 31,40-42). The apostles learned from Jesus' words and from their own experiences that preaching God's message to a sinful world is always rewarding but seldom easy.

So it is with us preachers today. In current day North America the challenges to spreading the gospel may not take the violent forms they did for the apostles in the first century. That doesn't make gospel spreading easy, however. Satan wages war against our evangelizing efforts in many and varied ways. Have you come up against the brick wall of apathy on the part of the people you're trying to reach? How about ridicule? Consider also our fleshly sloth, fed by disappointment and pessimism, that eats away at our desire to get out of our chairs and actually try to talk to some people about Jesus in their homes. Proclaiming the gospel to someone who has never really heard it before is always rewarding but seldom easy.

It's like we're sheep out there among wolves. Actually, we are, for our Lord said so (Mt 10:16). What he said next, however, has a profound impact on our outreach attitudes precisely because it is directed at the fact that bringing the gospel to someone outside the church is usually a hard thing to do. "Be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves." Because there are so many sinful attitudes, within and without, that attack our evangelism efforts, Jesus says, "Be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves." What ideas for mission work has the Evangelist Matthew given us through his inspired recording of those two similes?

As shrewd (*φρόνιμος*) as snakes, Jesus said. Neither "shrewd" nor "snakes" leaves us with the most positive picture. I tend to think of the proverbial "shrewd businessman" who will use any means, including unscrupulous means, to make a buck. But that's not what "shrewd" means at all, not to mention being an insult to all the shrewd businessmen of the world. We can see from the Greek word that Jesus was talking about a missionary who is willing to use his head. This is a gospel proclaimer who is thoughtful, that is, he thinks things through and puts the reason he has received from God to good use in the cause of spreading God's message. Here is the disciple who takes Jesus' words to heart and thus becomes like the "shrewd" man who builds his house on the rock (cf. the Greek of Mt 7:24). Here is the evangelist who is ready for action in

Christ's kingdom even as he awaits the Bridegroom's return, like the five "shrewd" virgins (cf. the Greek of Mt 25:2). Why did Jesus use snakes as his picture of shrewdness for the apostles? I'll never forget what a Christian man from India told me about this passage. He understood Jesus' simile to be a reference to the snake's uncanny ability to get into whatever place it wants to go. Think about it. You can't really stop a snake from getting somewhere it wants to go. First century residents of Palestine would have known snakes for that same ability. Their shrewdness could be seen in their ability to *get in*.

As innocent (*ἀκέραιος*) as doves, Jesus said. Literally the word means unmixed and it conjures up the picture of pure water, with no foreign particles mixed in, or pure gold, with no alloy mixed in. Paul would later use the word to describe that basic Christian quality of staying separate from evil (Php 2:15; Rom 16:19). It would be easy for the apostles to pass themselves off as something they were not when threatened with physical persecution. Preachers who were given to asking who was the greatest could easily fall into the trap of evangelizing with a view toward self-aggrandizement, looking at people as trophies for their own glory rather than souls for God's glory. In short, it would be easy for them to get "mixed up" in all sorts of improper motives for doing what Christ called them to do. Yet, Jesus' instruction was clear. Be pure in your motivation. Be up front. You're not out to trick people, you're out to witness to them. Take care not to let the "what" of your mission get you mixed up as to the "why" of your mission.

SNAKES AND DOVES IN BALANCE

Be shrewd. Be innocent. Jesus' instructions for those first missionaries in their setting allow us to consider the way we do mission work in our settings. We are struck by the balance of his imperatives. Shrewdness is not to overpower innocence, to push it aside for the sake of expedience or effectiveness. Innocence is no excuse for not using our heads in the way we make contact with the souls to whom we so desperately want to introduce Jesus. The Master calls for both qualities in us as we reach out to our communities with his gospel.

This godly balance of shrewdness with innocence is important as we seek to implement a style of evangelism that is being talked about more than any other in our circles: friendship witnessing. Based on the premise that friendship naturally presents many opportunities to share the Savior, friendship witnessing is an evangelism style that most parishioners see as "low intensity." It doesn't involve knocking on doors. It doesn't involve confronting strangers. It involves being friends – in fact, being the best friend anyone could ever have – with someone you're already friends with. Pastors will want to promote friendship witnessing by conducting periodic workshops and Bible studies on the topic. They'll also want to be snakes in this area by putting their heads together with congregational leaders to come up with opportunities for members to rub shoulders with the unchurched in the hope that gospel-sharing friendships will develop. Of course, pastors and evangelism committees can't force anyone to be friends with anyone else. But we can work hard and work smart in planning events that demonstrate our Christian friendliness to the community.

Therefore, we snakes plan our sports camps and our daycares and our block parties and our carnivals and our 5K's and our open gyms to create a climate in which friendship with the unchurched may blossom. And yet, the innocence of doves cannot take a back seat. We take care that our motives are pure in cultivating these friendships. Were we to give our unchurched friend the impression that the only activity we ever wanted to do with them was to attend church,

wouldn't they be justified in doubting the authenticity of our friendship? A dove says, "Yes, I want to go to church with you. I wouldn't be much of a friend if I didn't want that. But I want to do a lot of other things with you, too. That's what friends do." Doves don't hide their faith in order to "get in" with somebody, either. Such blending in is not to infiltrate the Enemy's territory. It is dishonesty and deception and may rightly be called the *πανουργία* (the willingness to "do anything") that Paul renounces in 2 Cor 4:2. Doves are above board in their desire for a real and lasting friendship with someone who will, God willing, become a forever friend through gospel testimony.

SNAKES AND DOVES IN SERVICE

What do we know about the Tabitha to whom we are introduced in Acts 9? We know she was a Christian who became sick and died and then was raised to life by Jesus through the apostle Peter. And we know this: she loved to serve others. She "was always doing good and helping the poor" (Ac 9:36). When Peter was led to the room that contained her lifeless body, he was confronted by a wailing crowd of widows bent on showing him all the robes and other clothing Tabitha had made in her service to them. It is safe to say that Tabitha had gained a reputation for herself and her faith through her willing service to the community.

The church I grew up in had a Dorcas Circle, using Tabitha's Greek name to refer to themselves as a group of women who willingly served their community by making clothing for the less fortunate. I don't know if there are a lot of Dorcas Circles any more. But I do know that our congregations more and more are thinking of new ways to help people in their communities physically with a view toward helping them spiritually. It has been said that people don't care what you know until they know that you care. "What we know" is the most important thing anyone could ever know: the rescue story of our Savior God. "What we know" is not inferior to "that we care," but the fact is that plenty of unchurched people have pegged churchgoers as just a bunch of Bible thumpers who are full of talk. When we walk the walk of the faith that burns in our hearts through acts of service, it may be then that those who seem hardest to reach are willing to give a hearing to the Servant's story.

The evangelistic snakes among us are providing ESL classes and food pantries and car washes and yardwork and back-to-school backpacks *free of charge* in this service evangelism. And they're shrewdly thinking of other ways to help members of the community around their church. But they're being doves about it, too. They're up front with a clear witness to the One who has provided us all with the greatest service. And when their service does not result in an accepted invitation to worship or BIC, they do not begrudge the service they provided. Doves see the ultimate good in all this to be the glorifying of God, something that happens through properly motivated acts of Christian service, even if we don't "get them into church."

SNAKES AND DOVES IN DEFENSE

Jesus called us to be witnesses to his saving work, not lawyers to convince people that his work really is to save. He called us to preach, not to prove. And we know that skillful, sound arguments for the "believability" of the gospel will not help a person "without the Spirit [to] accept the things that come from the Spirit of God" (1 Cor 2:14). Yet, we also know that potential prospects in the church's neighborhood are intellectually rational creatures who may

just have a “blind faith” bias against going to church. Church is for people with faith, and faith is for people who ignore facts – so the bias goes. Such cool, satanic logic often leads people to shut their ears even to giving a hearing to a simple gospel invitation.

Snakes look for a way in. Snakes realize that a witness to Christ is not the time to back down and say nothing about *why* we believe *what* we believe. Snakes realize that Christianity is reality and can be communicated as such. The Christian faith is rooted in the historical facts of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. These historical facts have been verified by good evidence, including the testimony of the historically accurate and incredibly well-supported Bible. Snakes are ready to defend that biblical record by means of Christian apologetics, not as a way to argue anyone into the kingdom of God but as an avenue for gaining a hearing for the gospel. Think of the intellectual objections you have heard. “God?!? How do I even know God exists? If God loves people like you say he does, why do so many bad things happen to good people? Why would I want to know what some ancient book developed from corrupted manuscripts has to say about my life today?” A snake knows that all these arguments are just so much blowing of smoke by people who do not want to confront their own mortality. So, shrewdly, he develops some rational defense of the faith to help clear the smoke and get to what’s really important – sin and grace.

Doves remember the goal is not to be the smartest or to sound the best-educated. Doves remember that what’s right is a lot more important than who’s right. Doves remember that the smart-aleck skeptic is not the enemy. Satan is. And the only way Satan’s strongholds may be torn down is by the supernatural power of the gospel, not the intellectual power of a perfectly reasoned argument. Answering objections then becomes a witness to Christ. Newsletter and website apologetic material becomes a way to show the prospect how much you care. You’re as innocent as a dove. You won’t be scared off by intellectual challenges, and you won’t lower yourself to participate in petty arguments. God, his Word, and that prospect mean too much to you to be less than pure in the way you defend the truth.

SNAKES AND DOVES TELL THEIR STORY

This is what God has done for me. This is what Jesus means to me. Perhaps the evangelistic snake within us views these testimonies with a bit of suspicion as far as evangelism is concerned. Too subjective. Too squishy. Too touchy feely. Yet, for an unchurched generation who love stories and long for relationships, the impact of “telling your story” of Jesus in your life cannot be denied. Bible writers like the psalmist (Ps 66:16), Paul (1 Tm 1:13,14) and John (1 Jn 1:3) use the language of personal testimony to introduce clear witnesses to the plan of salvation. It is shrewd for congregational leaders to find ways for their members to articulate their stories as a lead-in to the Greatest Story Ever Told. Every Christian has a dramatic, death-to-life conversion story to tell. Every Christian has stories of how gospel peace and security have made all the difference in the way they cope, in the way they handle the heartbreaks and setbacks of life. The question many unchurched people have about Christianity is not so much “Is it true?” as “Does it work?” Christian testimonials provide a positive answer by means of stories of daily victories.

We’re using our heads in evangelism when we connect our members’ testimonials to the ears of our prospects. Why not have a member tell the story of how Jesus has made a difference in their life through their church in every prospect newsletter? Why not dedicate a portion of the

website homepage to the same? How about having a BIC graduate address the newly assembled BIC to tell their story of what that class has meant to them? Snakes are not afraid to instruct in this form of evangelism, helping God's people articulate a story where Christ is the centerpiece and everything revolves around the forgiveness of sins.

Let's be as innocent as doves in these testimonials. Our purpose is not to shock the prospect into church with tales of how far we've come. Nor is our purpose to distort Christianity by focusing only on outward and obvious successes in our testimonials. And our purpose certainly is not to stop listening to the prospect just so we can talk about ourselves. Innocent doves are humble doves who want nothing more than to introduce Jesus to someone who doesn't know him. Innocent doves are up front about telling Jesus' story through their own life story. Innocent doves don't try to make that life story any more amazing than grace already is.

SNAKES AND DOVES INVITE

How realistic is it for a pastor to think that his members will approach their neighbors about worship and say what Philip said to Nathanael: "Come and see" (Jn 1:46)? How realistic is it for a pastor to think that his members will invite their friends to Sunday morning worship by saying what the Samaritan woman said to the residents of Sychar: "Come, see...the Christ" (Jn 4:29)? Plenty realistic! When God's people thrill to the story of their own salvation and are spiritually satisfied with preaching and teaching that touches their hearts and applies God's truth to their lives, they willingly invite others. We know from experience that the largest percentage of visitors to our services and Bible classes are not walk-ins, they're the ones who are invited.

Shrewd evangelists never abandon "come" strategies for outreach even though they may emphasize "go" strategies. To invite a neighbor to come partake of Christian worship or Christian education or Christian counseling at the church is to be part of an evangelism team. The inviter may lack confidence in communicating law and gospel personally and winsomely, but they do have confidence in their teammates at church presenting a clear message of God's love in Jesus. Let's be snakes about this. Promoting invitations through our build-ups to Friendship Sundays and providing professionally prepared invitations to Christmas and Easter worship are practical ways to help God's people be invitational evangelists. Snakes also think of non-worship church activities to which the unchurched may be invited. The Christian life skills seminars (e.g. marriage; parenting; healthy living; financial planning) that benefit our members will also be events to which non-members would appreciate an invitation.

But when the fellowship event we invite our prospect to has no mention of Christ, can we really say we are being innocent as doves with our invitation? When the Friendship Sunday service bears no resemblance to all the other Sunday services we'd like our prospect friend to come to, can we really say we are being "up front" with the unchurched? When the financial planning seminar could be taught by a non-Christian accountant since there is absolutely no Christian perspective in it, can we really say we are ringing a clear bell as to who we are? Doves check their motivation and their message. Both will unabashedly reflect Christ and his desire for the lost to be found, not just entertained.

SNAKES AND DOVES IN EDUCATION

The growth of the number of early childhood schools in our church body is testimony to something evangelists have known for years. Nothing attracts the unchurched to our churches more than quality care and education for their children. While it is true that Joe and Joanne Unchurched may not send Johnny Unchurched to our preschool, elementary school, or high school for the right reason, snakes do not fret. They're happy for the opportunity to place the gospel on young hearts and happy that Joe and Joanne view their church school as something they need. Therefore, snakes promote their school in the community. They publicize the excellent college training their teachers have received. They think of their school as a mission arm of their congregation and thus they look for ways for the unchurched community to get to know their school. They conduct the open houses, and they attend the private education fairs to say "We're here and we'd love to serve your family with a quality Christian education."

Doves do what they always do when considering evangelizing the unchurched through Christian schools. Doves check their motivation. Perhaps we cannot expect our prospects to bring their children to our schools for the right reasons, but we should be certain that we're educating those children for the right reasons. We educate them because they are precious souls (and so are their parents), and we get to touch those souls with the gospel with the fervent hope that they will come to know the Lord Jesus in faith through that gospel proclamation. We educate them because such a service is part of loving our neighbors as ourselves, all to the glory of God. We educate them not for the tuition money they provide us but because of the riches of grace Christ has provided us, them, and the whole world. Doves check their motivation.

And if that motivation flows pure and unmixed, so will the language we use to talk about our schools to the unchurched. We will not try to hide our purpose of bringing the gospel to all the children under our care. We will not try to hide our school's close affiliation with our church, nor will we hide our desire to see our school family become part of our church family and how that happens. We will not try to hide our school's unique way of handling discipline through the proper application of law and gospel. We will not try to hide our firm doctrinal stance nor the fact that we refuse to argue about it. We will not try to hide the fact that part of school attendance is often church attendance and how we expect the parents' support in that matter. And if our school's primary purpose is to produce called workers for our church body, we will be up front about that too, especially with international students for whom it may be difficult to receive authorization to work in this country. Unmixed motives call for unmixed, honest messages to those who show interest in our schools.

BOTH, AND

A lay leader, a pastor, a congregation, a church body all understand that Jesus instructed us to be both shrewd and innocent in the cause of making disciples, to use our heads and to follow Christ's heart as we touch our communities with the gospel. Are we blessed to have some evangelists who are particularly gifted in the shrewdness of snakes? Yes, we are. What a shame if their "thinking outside the box" as to how to penetrate an unchurched community would only be viewed as playing fast and loose with the doctrine of the means of grace. Are we blessed to have some evangelists who are particularly gifted at recognizing and avoiding evangelism methodologies that are less than innocent because they are premised upon less than scriptural truth? Yes, we are. What a shame if their discernment in this matter was only viewed as having less of a heart for the lost. "Be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves," Jesus said. Both

and. God grant us a rich measure of Christ's Spirit so that disciple-makers trust one another, learn from one another, and spur one another on to work our mission fields shrewdly and innocently.