

UNTRAINED, ORDINARY BUT EFFECTIVE

By Peter Chao

The most effective witness was given by those who were seen to be “unschooled and ordinary”¹ That was how the religious elite concluded when they observed the kindness and courage of the first disciples.

Kindness is sensitivity to the needs of people. As Peter and John were on their way to the temple for prayers, they saw an ugly sight at the “Beautiful Gate.” A crippled beggar pleaded for alms from them. Sensing what the beggar needed was more than money, Peter pronounced, “Silver or gold I do not have, but what I have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk!”² Our needs are frequently covered by the fig leaves of our presenting problems. Only the sensitive can discern the real needs, and compassion will compel them to reach out in acts of kindness. Peter perceived the healing of the crippled beggar as an “act of kindness”³ for which the nervous authorities called to account.

Effective evangelism is essentially natural. Meeting the crippled beggar was not orchestrated. Peter and John were going about their normal activity. What they did for the needy person came instinctively. It was an expected response from people sensitive to the needs of others. We cannot manufacture compassion. It is nurtured when we spend time with Jesus. The religious rulers “took note that these men (Peter and John) had been with Jesus.”⁴ Compassion finds every opportunity in life’s situations to be expressed. Compassion does not need to make an appointment to “show and tell.” Compassionate expressions are appreciated as acts of kindness. There is sincerity, vulnerability, and self giving in compassionate acts.

A person of compassion cannot sit still in the face of a need. There is a compulsion to do something, to find a way to meet the need. There is spontaneity and creativity in finding avenues to meet the need. It is not necessary for special training to become a compassionate person. We could be as “unschooled and ordinary” as Peter and John, but be as effective as they were. The most effective and effusive witnesses I know have not gone to Bible school, nor were they trained in rhetoric or apologetics. They are not skilled in verbal gymnastics, but they are genuine in reaching out to others. You cannot suppress their enthusiasm nor talk them out of creating opportunities to share Christ. Frequently, I have been embarrassed by their apparent naivete or simplicity. But every time I have been astonished by the positive responses to their genuine compassion. There have been times I have felt over-schooled into paralysis in the face of a need, preferring to analyze than to act in compassion.

It is little wonder Peter and John were seen as having been with Jesus because they behaved just like their Master. In His own hometown, religious folks were amazed at Jesus as they asked, “Where did this man get this wisdom and these miraculous powers? Isn’t this the carpenter’s son? Isn’t his mother’s name Mary, and aren’t his brothers James, Joseph, Simon

¹ Acts 4:13

² Acts 3:1-10

³ Acts 4:9

⁴ Acts 4:13

and Judas? Aren't all his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all these things?"⁵ Yet, the common folks could not have enough of Jesus, amazed that "He taught as one who had authority."⁶ Jesus, too, was seen as unschooled and ordinary, but what power He wielded to meet the deepest needs of humanity!

However, "unschooled" does not mean "without substance." "Without formal training" is **not** synonymous with "without content. When called to disclose his authority, Peter declared, "It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed...Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved."⁷ Here is the Gospel in a nutshell, uncomfortably familiar with the religious rulers yet powerfully effective to meet the greatest human longings. Here is the exclusivity of Christ proclaimed in a most unapologetic manner, yet offensive only to the disingenuous. To those who receive God's mercy gratefully, His unchallenged Sovereignty makes perfect sense.

The declaration of Christ made sense in the wake of a demonstration of Divine Love. It identifies the Person who has the power to make life whole. It describes the larger context of God's redemptive purposes. Peter's pronouncement broadened from the specific experience of the crippled beggar's deliverance to the cosmic redemptive plan in God's heart. The cognitive piece serves to interpret and explain the meaning of the experience of divine power. On its own, an argument could be cogent, but not necessarily relevant or meaningful. The Gospel has at its core the God who loves, and demonstrates that commitment to people, the object of His love. The response that is sought is a personal commitment to God. That is a response of the entire person – heart, soul and mind. What God desires is so important that the task of witnessing the Gospel cannot be restricted to the informed few, but must be effectively practiced by the grateful many.

Peter and John, unschooled and ordinary, were so effective in their witness that the religious leaders admitted, "Everybody living in Jerusalem knows they have done an outstanding miracle, and we cannot deny it."⁸ An experience of mercy and love is irrefutable. It is a loud witness, an undeniable intrusion of grace that begs an explanation. Peter and John were ready to give reason for grace. They said, "For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard."⁹ No convoluted arguments, just descriptions a witness gives – what is seen and heard. Arguments can be refuted; a truthful description of what is seen and heard cannot be contradicted. All it takes is courage. For unschooled and ordinary people to venture a proclamation that makes a difference between heaven and hell, it takes astonishing courage.¹⁰

Only those who have drunk deep from the fountain of grace can find the compassion to exercise acts of kindness and the courage to declare the love of God in a sensitively relevant

⁵ Matthew 13:54-56

⁶ Matthew 7:28-29

⁷ Acts 4:10, 12

⁸ Acts 4:16

⁹ Acts 4:20

¹⁰ Acts 4:13

way. And because eternity is at stake, effective witnessing is not an optional luxury, but a sacred obligation.

Erasmus, the famous Renaissance scholar, once told an apocryphal story which was designed to emphasize how important it is that we take up the torch of Christ's ministry with great commitment. In the story, Jesus returns to heaven after His time on earth. The angels gather around Him to learn what all happened during His days on earth. Jesus tells them of the miracles, His teachings, His death on the cross, and His resurrection. When He finishes His story, Michael the Archangel asks Jesus, "But what happens now?" Jesus answers, "I have left behind eleven faithful disciples and a handful of men and women who have faithfully followed Me. They will declare My message and express My love. These faithful people will build My church." "But, " responds Michael, "what is these people fail? What then is Your other plan?" And Jesus answers, "I have no other plan!"

The good news is that the Holy Spirit is here to melt us, mold us, fill us, and use us.

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