

# Personal Evangelism

Our question for this month has to do with evangelism and witnessing. A reader has asked, “Is the idea of personal evangelism Biblical” (cf. recent issues of the Standard Bearer)?

Very simply, the answer to this question is: “There is no such thing as personal evangelism, and the idea is a denial of everything that we as churches believe about the preaching of the gospel and damaging both to the preaching of the gospel and to the calling that believers do have to be witnesses of Christ.” Personal evangelism is no part of our creed.

The word evangelism means “to bring glad tidings and is ALWAYS used in Scripture to refer to the official preaching of the gospel by an ordained servant of God. There is not a single passage in Scripture which uses the word in any other way. The noun form of the word is always simply translated as gospel and the verb form is translated twenty-four times “to preach the gospel,” twenty-four times “to preach,” and three times “to declare or bring glad tidings.”

Those who tout the idea of personal evangelism use Acts 8:4 as proof that individual believers have a calling to do evangelism, that is, to “preach,” though they are quick to add that this is not the official preaching of the gospel and is always done in connection with the official preaching. They are wrong, however.

Acts 8:4 is the only passage that can be used to support their ideas in that it says: “Therefore they that were scattered abroad, i.e., believers, went every where *preaching* the word.” There are several considerations here.

1. When a word is used, as this is, with only one meaning in Scripture it is bad exegesis and a violation of the important rule that Scripture interprets itself, to make the word mean something else in a single passage. Here in Acts 8 the very next verse uses the same word to refer to the official preaching of the gospel by Philip. Because of that it is entirely arbitrary to make the word refer to something else than the official preaching in the preceding verse.

2. We do believe the calling to preach is the calling of believers by virtue of the fact that they hold the office of all believers, but they carry out this calling *through their ordained officebearers*. This is the case in Acts 8 as well. The rest of the chapter gives several examples of what verse 4 is speaking of and in both cases it involves the official preaching of the Word by an ordained man.

Does this mean that believers have no calling in connection with the preaching and in the work of gathering the church? It does not, but their calling is described in Scripture as “giving an answer” (I Pet. 3:15) commonly referred to as “witnessing.” In fact, their calling is not so much as to *be* witnessing, but to *be ready* to do so!

Does it matter that this calling of believers is referred to as “personal evangelism?” We believe it matters very much, first of all, because it confuses the official preaching of the gospel with other things and leaves the impression that it may be done by anyone. There are enough unordained preachers around who justify their existence and work on similar grounds without. It begets the same confusion as the practice of calling doctors, school-teachers and agricultural workers “missionaries.”

Especially in our own churches where we have so long believed in the distinct character of the official preaching of the gospel, this confusion can only do great harm and lead in the end to such unbiblical practices as lay preaching and mission work that is done by anyone who takes a fancy to the work. If we lose the truth that the preaching of the gospel is the work of those whom Christ has sent then we also lose the truth that it is Christ Himself who speaks and works through the preaching.

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