

No Fail Witnessing

God doesn't hold you responsible for "results," only for sharing the message.

BY BILL BRIGHT

On a bright, hot day in Oklahoma many years ago, I had concluded a visit with my parents and was driving toward the airport in a rented car. Ahead, I saw a big truck pulling out from a side road, preparing to enter my lane of the highway.

In a flash, I thought, *I have the right-of-way — surely, he's going to stop till I've gone past.* I was wrong. He pulled right in front of me, and there was no way I could stop or swerve to avoid him.

The crash totaled my car. My only injury was a small scratch on my arm. But the truck driver, at fault for not yielding the right-of-way, was badly shaken. We left the car beside the road, and he drove me back to Coweta to see his boss.

The boss was the county commissioner, a long-time friend of my family, to whom I had witnessed several times previously. He helped me handle the details and reporting of the accident, then drove me to the airport. I just knew in my heart that the Lord would use these otherwise traumatic circumstances to allow me to share Christ again with this man. I decided to be straightforward with him.

"You know, I think the Lord may have allowed all this to happen so I could talk to you again. We just never know when an accident like this can take our lives. I was ready to go — suppose it had happened to you? Are you ready to go?"

But he still wasn't ready. "It just isn't for me," he said.

I got on the plane thankful that God had spared my life, but also sorrowful that, once again, this man had rejected the Lord Jesus Christ.

Failure. Fear of it can be one of the biggest crippers of a faithful witness, for none of us likes to be "turned down." We tend to take it personally, regarding a rejection of our message as a rejection of our person. It hurts to be turned down. It hurts even more when we've reached out in genuine love, and we see the person refuse the greatest Gift ever offered to mankind, God's Son. Compassion for the lost does not come without tears.

But one of the liberating facts of the Christian life is that God does not ask anything of us that His Son has not already gone through Himself. Jesus Christ, to whom crowds walked miles for teaching and healing, saw His message rejected by many. Unlike us, however Jesus did not grieve because His ego had been hurt. He grieved because people rejected the Giver of life and the gift of eternal life.

DID JESUS "FAIL" IN HIS WITNESSING?

Our Lord's ministry raises some interesting questions: Did He "fail" in His witnessing? Did He fail when the rich young ruler walked away from Him, refusing to give God first place in his life? Did He fail because Judas Iscariot never received Him as his Messiah? Did He fail because one of the thieves crucified with Him refused to acknowledge His lordship? Was He a failure because many in the throngs around Him didn't receive Him?

Our Lord Himself answered these questions in His prayer to His heavenly Father at the end of His earthly ministry: "I brought glory to you here on earth by doing everything you told me to" (J n. 17:4, TLB).

Despite rejection, or what we might call "failures," our Lord Jesus Christ knew His mission was near completion. He had obeyed His Father's commission. He had brought the message, and was about to complete it with His death and resurrection. While He grieved over those who had rejected Him, He had not failed. He had done "everything" which God had given Him to do.

ALL HE ASKS IS OBEDIENCE

Our heavenly Father asks no more of us than this: that we obey His command to "Go, and preach the gospel to every creature." His command is not to "convert everyone." Jesus did not, and neither can we. But we can obey; we can spread the message to all who will listen and then trust God for the results.

The ministry of Jesus Christ modeled for us a liberating truth about our witnessing efforts:

Success in witnessing is simply taking the initiative to share Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit, and leaving the results to God.

Jesus never failed in His ministry. He accomplished all His Father had commissioned Him to do. Likewise, we do

not fail if we obey what God wants us to do, motivated by genuine love and compassion. We fail in witnessing only if we disobey God's command to share His love in the power of the Holy Spirit:

Failure in witnessing = failing to witness.

Had I not learned this truth, I would have been confused and defeated after that county commissioner rejected my message. Or I might have been discouraged one night in Washington, D.C., after I followed the Holy Spirit's prompting to ask the parking lot attendant if he was a Christian.

"My dad was a minister," he snapped, "and he didn't practice what he preached. So I had as much of that stuff as I could stand." He went on to tell me how he had left the church and didn't want any thing to do with God.

We talked further. He had never received the Lord, and no matter what I said, he didn't want to do so now.

I went to my room in the hotel. But my soul wouldn't rest. This man was important to the Lord, and my heart went out to him. I decided to go back downstairs, out into the parking lot, and talk further with him. But again he refused to receive Christ.

I hurt for him. His rejection of the Savior grieved me.

But had I failed?

If Christ's example is reliable, the task at hand was not to get results. That may or may not happen. The task was to obey Him and share Christ as effectively and lovingly as I knew how.

THE SECRET OF SUCCESS

When you obey God, motivated by love, you cannot fail. Your message might be accepted or rejected, but when you share Christ in obedience to God's command and the Holy Spirit's leading, you succeed in witnessing, no matter what the immediate result.

Success in witnessing is simply taking the initiative to share Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit, and leaving the results to God.

Read that statement aloud. Memorize it. Whenever the fear of failure begins to immobilize you, preventing you from obeying God in witnessing, repeat this statement to yourself. Success in witnessing is simply sharing Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit, and leaving the results to God.

This is not to be interpreted as advocating a "hit-and-run" approach to witnessing and ministry, without conscientious follow-up to help new believers get into God's Word and grow in their faith. Rather, this definition is intended to remove from today's frustrated Christian the burden of "results."

To the faithful witness, there will come many joyous experiences of leading others to Christ. In most countries and cultures, we find that between twenty five and fifty percent of those who hear the gospel receive Christ as a result. But if these positive numbers are true, then between fifty to seventy-five percent will say "no," at least upon first hearing.

Do the "no's" constitute failure? Go back to the definitions of success and failure in witnessing. Repeat them aloud. Do these percentages justify our not sharing Christ, because we might hit a streak of "no's"?

Once I was in Wheaton, Illinois, holding a lay institute where we gave training in how to share one's faith. Part of the institute consisted of an afternoon of door-to-door witnessing.

A good friend of mine, a professor at Wheaton College, came up to me and said, "I want to go with you, Bill. You're the professional. "

"Look," I replied, "there are no professionals. Unless God works in the hearts of men, nothing happens. He only asks us to be obedient and proclaim the message."

Well, my friend thought that since I had taught many Christians how to witness more effectively, perhaps some of the "magic" would rub off on him. And I don't know why the Lord allowed it, but that day was absolutely the worst witnessing experience I've ever had. We were almost bodily thrown out of one house. Another listener reacted very angrily. We didn't see one single person who was interested in even talking with us. We hit an incredible, unexplainable streak of "no's" all afternoon.

In almost forty years of sharing my faith, I can count on the fingers of one hand the number of hostile rejections that I remember. And a good portion of them seemed to hit on that day!

But, if anything good came of it, the experience made my friend feel better. Maybe God wanted to encourage him by illustrating that even Bill Bright, the "professional" at witnessing, didn't have the power to lead anyone to the Lord unless God Himself did it.

WHAT CHRIST TAUGHT ABOUT FAILURE

For those who are afraid even to try, considering the chance that a number of listeners will say "no," there is assurance in the parable of the sower. Here, Christ illustrated the varied effectiveness of His message:

"A farmer was sowing grain in his fields. As he scattered the seed across the ground, some fell beside a path, and the birds came and ate it. And some fell on rocky soil where there was little depth of earth; the plants sprang up quickly enough in the shallow soil, but the hot sun soon scorched them and they withered and died, for they had so little root. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns choked out the tender blades.

"But some fell on good soil, and produced a crop that was thirty, sixty, and even a hundred times as much as he had planted." -Mt. 13:3-8, TLB

There are four types of listeners, Christ taught. And only one of the four will take the message (the seed) and put it to work in his life.

"The good ground represents the heart of a man who listens to the message and understands it and goes out and brings thirty, sixty, or even a hundred others into the Kingdom." -Mt. 13:23, TLB

The other three listeners (types of soil) will squander the message or reject it outright. Jesus Christ Himself recognized this, and though His compassion drove Him to love and long for every human soul, He knew that man would exercise his God-given power of free choice both for and against Him. And man continues to do so today.

NO WASTED WITNESS

So there will be "no's." We should always presuppose a positive response, since the world is hungrier now for the gospel than ever before. Indeed, the fields are white unto harvest. But when the "no's" come, we shouldn't be surprised or discouraged.

And we just never know, really, where the "no-s" will lead.

Tom and Dorrine, a married couple from Washington, D.C., went witnessing as part of a church program. They visited a home where a man and woman, who were living together unmarried, were so loaded on drugs that they couldn't carry on a conversation.

So Tom and Dorrine left a gospel book let on the coffee table, and suggested that when the couple felt like it they could read the booklet. Tom and Dorrine had received their "no," unspoken yet unmistakable.

Two weeks later, the woman came across the booklet and began to read. Its simple gospel presentation convicted her, and she knelt in her living room and received Jesus Christ into her life. Then she gave it to the man she'd been living with, and after several days he pulled out the booklet, read through it, and accepted the Lord.

Several weeks passed, and this couple listened to Christian programs on radio and TV. As they heard more of God's Word, they wanted to attend church, and one Sunday they entered the church down the block. It was the same church from which Tom and Dorrine had gone witnessing.

When the pastor gave the invitation, the man and woman went forward to declare their new faith in God and to be baptized. They stopped living together as singles, but soon were married. Five years later, they had grown so much in their walk with the Lord that he was asked to be a deacon in the church, and she was active in several ministries.

When Tom and Corrine left the haze of this couple's drug-filled living room that first day, they must have thought, *Boy, what a waste of time!*

But because of that initial contact, made out of obedience to a God who says, "Go, and preach the gospel," God turned this couple's "no" into a "yes" and brought two new dedicated believers into His Kingdom.

There really is no wasted time.

It had been many years since my car accident. My wife's father passed away, and we returned to Oklahoma. At the graveside service the presiding pastor gave a challenge to the people standing there.

"Now, Roy Zachary was ready to meet the Lord," he said, "Are you? If you're not ready, Christ wants to come into your life."

I turned around, and behind me stood my county commissioner friend from years before. I could see tears forming in the corners of his eyes.

The last thing I wanted to do was disturb the sacredness of the moment. But I knew that, again, God was nudging me to speak with him.

"Are you ready, my friend? Don't you think it's about time you make this decision?"

"Yes, sir," his voice cracked as he whispered, "It's time." When the service ended, we moved to a private spot, and he received Christ through a prayer that began, "Lord Jesus, I need You..."

Isn't it great that we can leave the results to God? Because of His power and love we need never be ashamed.

MICHELLE'S TOUCH

Michelle was our neighborhood "Bible thumper." The first thing I noticed after we met was her happy enthusiasm. Vacation Bible school beckoned, and each morning she stuffed her VW bus with neighborhood children. Kids bored with summer holidays reached out for a new experience. Their mothers eagerly sought a few mornings of peace. Michelle served those needs with fervor.

After my daughter and I attended a VBS session, I realized this woman differed from my other friends. We had spent three hours together, and not one bit of gossip, not one four letter word or critical comment had escaped her lips. She did not conform to the neighborhood pattern.

As our friendship deepened, I examined her critically. Expecting weirdness, I found instead compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience.

One afternoon Michelle's son barged through the door dripping with angry tears. He gasped out a story of neighborhood bullies pelting him with stones and taunting, "Jesus freak! Jesus Freak!"

As Michelle calmly comforted her son, I waited for an explosion of motherly indignation. Instead she held Doug's hand and quietly prayed for the souls of the bullies! In amazement I questioned her serenity.

"I'm so angry I can hardly talk," she said. "But Romans 12:14 tell us, 'Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse.'"

That incident haunted me for days! As the summer lazed by, I looked for fanaticism and discovered only love. I listened for pious posing but heard spiritual wisdom. I expected hypocrisy and found honesty. The family focused on a living God who met people's needs. Their lifestyle stood solidly on truth.

I don't know if any of the neighborhood children found Christ that summer because of Michelle's touch. But I know that I did.

I found Him because one family lived Christianity. They lived it in my neighborhood, and they lived it daily.

Now I am trying, in my way, to emulate Michelle. I do not relate to the severely persecuted. I am unable to duplicate unselfish service to hurting masses in faraway places. I cannot evangelize millions. But perhaps I, like Michelle, can touch people around me if I act on Paul's advice: "Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers" (1 Ti m. 4:16).

-Barbara A. Robidoux

THE POWER OF THE GOSPEL

1. Read Jesus' Great Commission in Mk. 16:15-16. Who does Jesus say has the ultimate responsibility for whether a person is saved?

2. What is the responsibility of the believer in others' salvation? (Ro. 10-13-14)

3. Consider Paul's account of his efforts in witnessing to the Corinthians in 1 Cor. 2:1-5. How does Paul describe his confidence level as he preached the gospel? (v. 3)

How does he describe his skill in preaching the gospel? (w. 1,4-5)

What did Paul rely on to make his message effective? (w. 4-5)

4. List the people who were important in bringing you to Christ, and tell how each influenced you.

Can you think of five non Christians on whom you could have a similar influence?

Which one of the individuals above could you begin to reach out to first? When and how will you take initiative to share Christ with that person?

BILL BRIGHT is founder and president of Campus Crusade for Christ International. This article is adapted from his book *Witnessing Without Fear*, copyright 1987, Campus Crusade for Christ(San Bernardino, Calif.: Here's Life Publishers). Used with permission.