

sharing our faith

So, a few months ago, as I previewed the themes of this Rooted study and planned out my teaching plan, I had a particular text and plan for today. And the closer we've come to it, the more I was looking forward to it.

But this was one of those weeks when what you planned gets scrapped. **And I want to explain why.**

So, if you are tracking with the Rooted discipleship journey, this week – week 9 – is on "**Why and how should we tell others?**"... In other words: personal evangelism, witnessing, sharing your faith, whatever you want to call it.

Which is a hugely significant topic, and also a bit of a minefield. Because it's both something we **all long** to grow in, but also something that has an incredible capacity to weigh on us with a world of guilt, discouragement or insufficiency. And you know what I'm talking about. I know this has often been my experience.

It's a hugely significant topic. One that we need to often come back to for many reasons, but one being simply because we can often lose sight of this in the rush of life's demands.

At least that's the case for me these days.

I know as I flipped the page from last week's study on stewardship to this week's study, I felt surprisingly thankful for this

focus – thankful to be invited to consider again the incredible invitation, privilege and responsibility to be a part of God's gracious revelation in the lives of friends and neighbors who don't know and follow Jesus. In the midst of the fast-moving train that is my life these days, I felt like this was something I needed.

But I'll be honest, my excitement to dive into this weeks study, by Day 3, was overtaken by **frustration** – with how the Rooted study handles a core aspect of this theme... *Maybe some of you experienced it as well.*

And I know that some of us aren't doing the daily Rooted study, and I've tried to navigate these Sundays in a way that is only loosely connects to the daily readings, so as not to alienate any of us, to make anyone feel that they are on the outside...

But today I feel the need to break ranks with this approach and to talk specifically about one aspect of the study that I think is unhelpful – *and I think this has relevance with all of us – no matter our engagement with the Rooted workbook* – and hopefully to reframe the conversation for us... Hopefully in a way that invites and empowers us to each play our part in God's ongoing revelation, rather than feel discounted or discouraged that maybe this isn't for us.

Which points toward what caught me in Day 3 of the study – the claim that evangelism, witnessing, sharing our faith is primarily and

essentially **about being able to tell your whole conversion** story to others in a simple and compelling way.

According to the authors, this is the essence of effective evangelism. ***The most effective way of evangelism.***

And so they make the case that one of the primary reasons for our anxiety in regard to evangelism is that "***we've never organized our thoughts in a way that makes telling it easy. That's what we will do this week. We will create a way to capture your faith journey in such a way that makes it easy to share, relevant to the person you are talking to, and compels him or her to move toward Jesus.***"

Now I don't know about you, but by the end of reading that paragraph I was pretty frustrated. **Very** frustrated actually.

Both for how it misrepresents the **beautiful complexity and mystery of conversion** – the diverse ways that God works in our lives to awaken us to the gospel and lead us to Himself – **AND** how it misrepresents **the essence of ordinary Christian witness**.

So, let me explore these two matters - one at a time.

And if you aren't working through the Rooted study, I suspect you've encountered this before, so I trust it will be relevant for us all.

First, we need to talk about the claim that all of our conversion stories can be distilled into one simple structure – and specifically, the framework of **before, commitment** and **after**.

According to the authors, **all of our stories** have three key parts:

- **Before** (what our life was like before Jesus).
- **Commitment** (what led us to decide to follow Jesus).
- **After** (how our life is different now because of Jesus).

And to demonstrate this, they draw on the example of the **Apostle Paul** – presenting Paul's conversion experience as the essential paradigm or pattern of conversion... of all Christian conversions.

A story which can easily be distilled – as Paul often did – into a **before, commitment and after** framework.

But here's the problem. Paul's conversion experience is not the paradigm for all **Christian conversion experiences**. God is not bound to one way of saving and converting us.

If we were to pause right now and ask different ones of us to tell the story of how God awakened us to the gospel and led us to Himself, we would marvel at the incredibly creativity and diversity of God's ways in our lives. That rarely does it happen the same way.

I had lunch this week with one of the business men in our church and we were talking about this and we made the observation that he has a story – a beautiful and compelling testimony – that can be told in this way – in a **before, commitment, and after** sort of way.

But that his own adult children couldn't tell their story – their beautiful and compelling testimony – in this same way.

Because for them, as it was for me, their awakening to the gospel and coming to faith, was very different. It was not a life-going in-one direction – encounter with Jesus – life-now-heading-in-a-different-direction story. It was much less bound to one particular and dramatic moment in life, and more of an ongoing, emerging, back and forth awakening, a slow and surprising wandering journey of revelation and conviction and response.

As beautiful and compelling as any and every conversion story.

But **not one that can** be distilled into a **before, commitment and after** framework. That's just not how God chose to work His grace in their lives, or in mine, or in many of yours...

Truth is, the testimony of **the Apostle Peter** (and all the rest of the apostles) doesn't fit into this so-called essential paradigm.

Think about the conversion story of the Apostle Peter – called as a fisherman to follow Jesus one day while cleaning his nets along the shore of the Sea of Galilee. If we were to present this event as his conversion story, sure maybe it could fit the grid – but this moment alone isn't his conversion – because at this point, Peter has no idea that Jesus is anything but a rabbi worth following. His journey to faith is a long process that involves many moments of insight, revelation, confrontation, giving up, being restored, bowing low and surrendering all.

Far all we know of Peter, he'd have been utterly unable to force his conversion story into the rubric of **before – commitment – after**. Not that following Jesus didn't radically and undeniably transform his life. But the parts don't simply fit the grid.

Which gives comfort and assurance to me that just because my conversion (or maybe yours) doesn't look like Paul's – and can't easily be distilled to three paragraphs – doesn't mean it's any less authentic or God-inspired... ***Or, for that matter, inspiring to others...***

Simply put, Paul's conversion is not the essential paradigm or pattern of conversion, any more than his encounter with the Resurrected Jesus in a blinding vision while riding a horse on the road to Damascus is to be understood as the norm of how everyone needs to encounter Jesus.

God is much more creative than that, and true Christian conversion is much more complicated than that.

Which isn't to say that there aren't recognizable markers, core dynamics that span the spectrum of every Christian conversion. I think there are – they just aren't **before, commitment** and **after**.

At the most basic level, every Christian conversion is the coming together of at least **three grace-inspired realities**:

(1) revelation,

(2) conviction

(and) response (the response of repentance and faith, expressed in following Jesus).

But the way this comes about is not according to any pattern.

For some, like Paul, it happened or happens all at once, in a linear fashion, and so their story divides easily into three demarcated movements.

But for many others – the rest of the apostles for example – this happens over a long and wandering journey, with many unexpected turns along the way.

In the end, the pattern does not matter – ***just the reality that grace has won the day and Jesus Christ is Lord.***

Many of you know that I'm a reader, always reading a few different things (right now I'm a bit immersed in reading books on world religions with the aim of seeing how the gospel and biblical worldview are unique... But that's for another series).

Anyways, over the years one genre I've come to love reading is **Christian biography** and particularly because of this – this opportunity to catch sight of ***another way*** that God has worked to lead someone to Himself.

Paul's conversion story is beautiful and compelling – but it is only one story.

There is no set paradigm for how the grace of faith comes about in the life of an individual, and therefore, no set paradigm that can distill every story to an easy three-part presentation.

We need to throw off the oppressive lie that all our stories need to conform to this one paradigm, and in its place to celebrate the diverse ways that God awakens and leads us to faith in Jesus.

No Christian should ever say "*I don't really have much of a testimony*". To say that is to believe a lie that there is only one kind of story that counts. Or that inspires others.

But it's not true. There is no such thing as a boring or uninspiring testimony. Life in Christ is always a miracle... always a beautiful gift of grace... always an act of God... whether the story is riddled with sin and rebellion or summer camps and youth group – or both...

Life in Christ is always a miracle... always a beautiful work of grace... always an act of God...

Ok, so that's the first part I wanted to push against and reframe – the way we think about conversion and our conversion stories...

If this part were an assignment for school, all of this would be my say of explaining – **"Why I couldn't properly complete day 3 & 4 in my study this week."** ☺

And **second**, directly related to this, I want to push against how the study presents **ordinary Christian witness** – as primarily a matter of **sharing your "Testimony"** – with a capital T" – your whole conversion story – your "before-commitment-after" story – wherever possible.

As though just because that's what Paul did in his trial speeches, that that is what we are called to do wherever possible with friends, neighbors and strangers.

Because when the Apostle **Paul** himself instructs **ordinary Christians** in witness (and I'm making a distinction here from when Paul explicitly addresses evangelists in his writing), we don't find him **describing our witness in this way** – as recounting our Testimony. Not that he would be against us doing so at times. But it doesn't seem to be his primary vision of ordinary Christian witness.

And for that matter, when the Apostle **Peter** similarly instructs **ordinary Christians** in witness, we don't find him directing us to constantly tell our Testimony.

Instead both apostles speak of ordinary Christian witness in the same way – as our helpful **reply**, our gracious **answer**, our personal **response** to the particular comments and questions of others as we share life together; as we live alongside of others as visible followers of Jesus...

If you have a Bible, turn with me **Colossians 4:2-6**, and hear

Paul's instructions...

(v.2) *"Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful. And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains. Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should."*

(v.5) *Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so **that you may know how to answer everyone.**"*

And now turn with me to the apostle Peter's counsel in **1 Peter 3:13-16**.

(v.13) *"Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good? But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. 'Do not fear their threats; do not be frightened.'"*

(v.15) *But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to **give an answer to everyone who asks you** to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander..."*

Obviously there are different things going on each of these communities and these letters are written by different people, and yet in both letters **ordinary Christian witness** is envisioned in essentially the same way – not as recounting our whole conversion story wherever and whenever possible, but as **a considerate response** to those who are provoked to questions as they witness the reality of Christ in us and among us.

This, according to the Apostle Paul and the Apostle Peter is ordinary Christian witness.

Not an attempt to tell the whole story of God or the whole story of our own conversion whenever and wherever possible, but **a gracious and fitting response** to those who are provoked to question as they witness the reality of Christ in us and among us.

"*Making the most of every opportunity*" – as Paul says.

I want us to consider those words for a moment, because I think they are often used to misconstrue our mandate.

"*Make the most of every opportunity.*"

I can understand someone reading that and interpreting it to mean trying to find a way to say as much as possible, to tell our whole story wherever possible. But in the light of what both Paul and Peter are saying in these passages – it sounds to me like an invitation to a much more thoughtful offering to the other of what is **most helpful** in the moment.

To quote something I read recently, "Making the most of every opportunity" is not about answering your friend's question, "What should I wear tonight?" with "*Think not about what you will wear. Let me tell you about how I clothed myself with Christ.*"

It's a ridiculous example, but here and there evangelism gets present this way – as an awkward and desperate attempt to insert a word of witness into any and every moment.

Which may sound like making the most of the opportunity, but it could also mean the end of opportunities with that friend.

This isn't about marketing or pushing Jesus on others wherever or whenever possible, but about **loving Christ and others enough to lean toward them** and **live our faith out loud in front of them** – that's what Paul and Peter and Jesus are inviting us to...

Sharing our real lives with others, with the prayer that they would come to know God's grace as well. Embracing whatever opportunities God brings to give witness to the grace of God that we know in Christ.

This is why I titled my talk this morning "**sharing our faith**", rather than "sharing our **Testimony**" – because although it is well worth reflecting on your own conversion story (I know I have benefited greatly on doing just that), as we think about sharing Christ with others, I wonder if what we need is to focus less on finding ways to tell our **Testimony** (in the sense of the event in our past when we turned to Christ) and to focus more on our **testimonies** – the ways that we are experiencing God's grace and work in our lives today... in ways

that has relevance and meaning for our friends and neighbors who don't know Christ.

As I reflect on experiences of sharing my faith with my non-Christian friends and neighbors, rarely has it been about retelling the whole story of my conversion (though there have been times when that has been just the right thing to share), but more often it's been about sharing from my life with Christ these days – the ways in which Jesus' presence and grace are real in my life today – in response to the questions of others or the sharing of others...

As I've sat with a neighbor as he opens up about how he and his wife are having a hard time conceiving...

Or I sit at the coffee shop with the non-Christian boyfriend of a young woman in my church...

Or as I hike the hills with my neighbor and friend and process together our work week and the ups and downs of our relationships with our kids...

Making the most of the opportunity means loving Christ enough and loving the other enough to pay attention to the questions they are asking and to the place they are on in their journey – and offering as much or as little as seems helpful in the moment – in dependence upon the Spirit... trusting God – the real Evangelist – to water and grow the seeds of the gospel that you and I sow in faith and love...

Oh that God would fill us with a new or renewed passion for others to know Christ and would lead us in love to be the kind of gracious companions that our friends and neighbors need at this point in their journey...

- **Invitation to the Lord's Table...**

----- **benediction**

Let me close with one final thought – something that's been a really helpful and encouraging to me in regard to all this.

- Ch.11 - "A Year in the Life of the Gospel" (John Dickson, The Best Kept Secret of Christian Witness)

Effective witness does not rest solely on any one of our shoulders. God uses all of us in a variety of ways – to promote and proclaim the gospel and to win over the heart and life of another.