



HAVE NO FEAR

BEING SALT AND LIGHT
EVEN WHEN IT'S COSTLY

JOHN LENNOX

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INTRODUCTION

Jesus said that his followers were ‘the salt of the earth’ and ‘the light of the world’ (Matthew 5:13–14). They were to have a profound influence on the society in which they lived, being a salty preservative to stem decay and blazing a path for others to follow. That is, their lives were to be active, not passive. They were to be Jesus’ witnesses to the world by how they lived and what they said. Those two things belonged together – what they said would only be credible if it was also modelled in their lives; and people would only understand their lives and the motivation for them if they spoke about and explained this. Jesus’ disciples were to be characterised by living out their faith in public, rather than keeping their faith private. They were to prove their authenticity as Christians by deliberately and willingly swimming against the stream.

That doesn't mean that they were never afraid. Indeed, Peter denied he even knew Jesus when a girl challenged him at the time of Jesus' trial. He became so scared he swore black and blue that he did not have anything to do with Jesus. Yet a few weeks later, when hostile religious authorities tried to censor the apostles, the same Peter said, 'we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard' (Acts 4:20). They were not going to be silenced. Later Peter wrote to his fellow Christians everywhere and so to us: 'always being prepared to make a defence to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you' (1 Peter 3:15).

Yet many of us don't feel always prepared. If we are honest, some of us don't really feel ready at all. We get scared of what people might say. The pressure to silence the public witness of Christians has not gone away. It is very real. Indeed, in many parts of the world the secular and religious opposition has intensified to the extent that, particularly in the West, the dominant attitude is that religion is a private business and should be kept that way. As a result, many Christians have been effectively silenced.

They may well continue to go to church but their witness has long since ceased because of fear and peer pressure.

I experienced this pressure very early on as a student. At a formal college dinner I found myself sitting beside a Nobel Prize winner. I had never met one before and, in order to gain the most from the conversation, I tried to ask him questions. For example, how had his science shaped his worldview, and what was his big picture of the status and meaning of the universe? In particular, I was interested in whether his wide-ranging studies had led him to reflect on the existence of God.

It was clear that he was not comfortable with that question so I immediately backed off. However, at the end of the meal he invited me to come to his study. He had also invited two or three other senior academics but no other students. I was invited to sit and, so far as I recall, they remained standing.

He began, 'Lennox, do you want a career in science?'

'Yes, sir,' I replied.

'Then,' he said, 'in front of witnesses, tonight,

you must give up this childish faith in God. If you do not, then it will cripple you intellectually and you will suffer by comparison with your peers. You simply will not make it.’

Talk about pressure! I had never experienced anything like it before. What does one do when faced with this kind of situation? But it does not take a brilliant scientist to create this sort of pressure and intimidation. A sarcastic remark about our faith in God from a teacher at school can be enough to embarrass us in front of our classmates. Even worse are posts on social media making fun of what we believe. They can make us hesitant or even ashamed and fearful of putting our heads above the parapet and aligning ourselves with Jesus Christ.

It is hard to swim against the flow. What can help us do it?

The purpose of this little book is to demonstrate that you – yes, you – can actually be a faithful witness to Jesus. Furthermore, this is not some grim task that you do because you feel guilty. Instead, it will bring you a great sense of joy and strengthen your Christian life and experience immeasurably.

GETTING STARTED

We’ve already seen, in 1 Peter 3:15, that Peter urges all Christians to be constantly ready to explain their faith. As we begin to look at evangelism in detail, it is helpful to look carefully at the context of this command:

Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good? But even if you should suffer for righteousness’ sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but in your hearts regard Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defence to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile

your good behaviour in Christ may be put to shame. For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil (1 Peter 3:13–17).

Peter's mention of fear is a good place to start since many people find witnessing initially quite scary. Peter personally knew about fear as a Christian, as we have also seen. He was writing to people who were feeling intimidated and insecure, and had good reason to do so. Yet instead of telling them to keep their heads down, he commands them, 'in your hearts regard Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defence to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you' (v. 15).

The antidote to fear is not so much in our store of answers to possible questions that might arise but is first of all in our attitude to our Lord. We are to honour him as Lord. We are also to remember that he is 'holy', which means 'set apart'. Peter is explaining that we prepare to engage in witness by deliberately focussing on Jesus' Lordship – of the world as well as of how we should live our lives. In this way a wrong

kind of fear – of others – is dispelled by the right kind of 'fear': of the Lord.

We are to be Jesus' ambassadors, by our words and actions. Yet we are not alone in this. Jesus promised his disciples – and us – that he would send the Holy Spirit to bear the major burden of witness: 'But when the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me. And you also will bear witness' (John 15:26–27). Jesus is in charge, encouraging us to witness. We need to get this straight, and can expect to have conversations about Jesus since he is more interested in other people than we are. Jesus is also present with us, by his Spirit, to guide our conversations and help us in all our uncertainties and fears.

CONVERSATION

Notice next in this passage that Peter is not talking about preaching – that is an ability that most of us do not have. He envisages a situation where someone else asks us about our Christian hope. That is, he is talking about a one-to-one chat. While this is public in one sense, it is only

between the two of you. That ought to make you feel a little more comfortable already!

It is one-to-one conversations that are the key to Christian witness. Notice too that it is *not* us who starts this conversation: we are to answer ‘anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you’ (v. 15). That is helpful because many of us stumble at the first hurdle: we don’t know how to start conversations about Jesus and so we never do.

However, you may be wondering why anyone would ask you about your Christian hope. I remember many years ago asking myself the same question. I had reached the stage where I thought I was ready to answer at least some questions about the Christian faith, yet no one asked me and so Peter’s statement seemed rather ineffective and useless. I shared my problem with a younger student friend, who at once replied, ‘Have you ever thought of asking them about their hope?’

‘No,’ I said.

‘Why not?’

‘Well, it’s obvious that many of them have no hope, so there is no point in asking them!’

‘Really?’ he questioned. ‘Try it.’

Not long after that I was on a train to London and found myself sitting beside a middle-aged man who was reading a scientific-looking text. I uttered, ‘Hello, are you a scientist.’

‘Yes, I am a metallurgist. How about you?’

‘I’m studying mathematics.’

The conversation then lapsed. He continued his reading. I took out a Gideon New Testament and started to read it. Yet he noticed what I was doing (as I hoped!) and eventually said, ‘Pardon me, but is that a New Testament you are reading?’

‘Yes,’ I said simply, and continued to read.

After a while he broke in once more: ‘I don’t wish to disturb you, but you did say you were a maths student, and yet here you are reading the Bible. How is that possible?’ I then remembered the advice I had received from my friend. I answered, ‘You want to know why I am reading the Bible? Tell me, have you got any hope?’

The effect was dramatic. He turned white and mumbled something about us all ‘muddling through’. I said, ‘You know I didn’t mean that. I meant, do you have any personal hope?’

‘None whatsoever,’ he replied. ‘Do you, and what is it?’

There it was – the question that Peter said would start the conversation. And it has started a multitude of others since then.

The essence of my conversation with this man teaches us two simple steps about how to witness to Jesus. First of all, I observed something about the man: the science text he was reading. Next, I asked a question related to it: ‘Are you a scientist?’

ASKING QUESTIONS

One of my heroes from the ancient world is the Greek philosopher Socrates, who was famous for the fact that he went around asking questions. Unfortunately, this got him into trouble for he was accused of corrupting the minds of the youth of Athens. The court sentenced him to death by suicide – an inexcusable tragedy. Please don’t let that put you off asking questions! I learned very early two things: firstly, that it is much easier to ask questions than to answer them; and secondly,

that questions are a great way to get into conversation with people – whether friends or strangers – and know them better.

Indeed, I have found that one of the best ways to proceed in chats with people, especially with those you have not met before, is to keep asking them questions until they ask you one. Of course, some of us might find that stressful since we have too much to say!

What sort of questions should we ask in order to have the opportunity to speak naturally of our Christian faith? We should begin with ordinary questions so that we can get to know them and learn how to build bridges with them. Therefore, ask them about their family, interests and job. At the same time be careful in case they might not be married, have children or be in a job – you may be in danger of giving the false impression that their family situation or job defines them. Of course, you may rapidly find that you share a common hobby or interest, for instance playing a particular sport, supporting the same football team, cooking or enjoying going on walks. Discussion will then rapidly flow.

This general questioning process might be enough for our first conversations together. During them we should be listening out for their questions about our faith, and when they arise, we need to take them seriously. We also need to be sensitive. For example, we may have had a loving father and so, as a Christian, can well understand what it means to have God as Father. But the person we are talking to may have been abused by their father and therefore may completely fail to understand us when we try to tell them what God being a Father means. We must constantly remind ourselves that we don't all come from the same background; what might encourage one person may upset another. Christ must be central – not us and our experience.

Let me give you another example of conversation starting. Once, when I was waiting for a flight, the man next to me was constantly interrupted by his mobile phone ringing. I could hear his responses – they were all terse instructions in how to deal with particular medical cases. He was quite agitated. So in one of the pauses I commented, 'Does your work always chase you like that?'

Relieved to have someone to talk to, he replied, 'I am afraid so. It would seem I am always on call. Is your life like that?'

'Not really, I am glad to say. I am a teacher in a university.'

Are you? I have a son at university and I am really worried about him. He is very lonely and is not getting much help to integrate with the others. May I ask you whether there are any resources to help students have hope in that kind of situation?'

There it was again: that word 'hope'. I could see that our flight was about to be called so I cut straight to the point and answered, 'May I be very personal since we don't have much time. I have in the end found that what gives me a hope that I can share with others is a living relationship with God. That is, my hope comes through trusting my life, with all its ups and downs and concerns, to Jesus Christ. Now that may well sound like so much jargon to you but you can find out all about it by reading the New Testament. Would you permit me to give you a New Testament to pass on to your son? Please also encourage him to get in touch with the Christian group in his

university which he will easily find – it is called the Christian Union (UCCF). He will find friendly students there who will be able to help.’

‘Thank you very much,’ he replied. ‘Would you mind if I read it too while I am on holiday?’

I never heard from him again. That often happens with brief encounters with strangers. I simply trusted the Lord that I had been a link in a chain to this man discovering the Christian hope, though the details of it I may never know – at least in this world.

I learned about this matter of trusting the Lord in the context of being a witness in my early days as a student. Another student had asked to talk to me about my faith in Christ. However, I was rather nervous about doing so and therefore, with his permission, I invited another Christian student, Stuart, to join us. (This was the same person who had told me to ask people about their hope!) Before the other student returned, Stuart prayed with words that I have often used since: ‘Lord, we pray that you will give us wisdom and help in this conversation to say what you want us to say: no less and no more.’

I put on some coffee and Stuart started the conversation by making a remark about his home football team, Preston North End. Instantly, a passionate discussion began and I discovered that there is much more to the world of football than I had ever imagined! Once Stuart had put him at his ease in this way, Stuart then moved to the question that had motivated the student to come to see me in the first place: ‘You would like to talk about faith in Christ. How can we help?’ The student was remarkably open with his questions and Stuart readily answered them, finally asking him if he would like to become a Christian there and then. ‘Is that possible?’ he asked. ‘It is indeed,’ Stuart replied, and led him in a prayer of commitment. And so in this instance, and in God’s kindness, a new Christian was born that day in my room.