

Bragging Rights

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Galatians 6:7-16

“May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ...”

Movement 1 – Exposure

How do we share the gospel with the world? Bart and Lisa were on vacation at the shore, and they had the challenge of making new friends during the time they were there. Bart decided to impress the local kids with a showy flash of skateboarding finesse and bravado. He did flips; he jumped over and under things. He showed his best material, thinking the onlookers would be so impressed that they would want to be his friend without hesitation.

Lisa decided to earn the kids’ respect by dressing like them, talking like them and acting like them. She bought a new wardrobe, she tried to act like her parents, school, and anything else that has any amount of authority was lame and not worth her time. She tried to say “whatever” after every other sentence to avoid sounding too nerdy and bookish. She even claimed that her knowledge of the shellfish on the beach was gleaned from an episode of *Baywatch* (this tells you how old this *Simpson’s* episode was).

Both Bart and Lisa wanted to be accepted by the locals, by the youth in the neighborhood and took two very different approaches to gain acceptance.

How do we share the gospel with the world? The Christians in Galatia were in a place that was diverse in its religions. It was a place of a multitude of cultures, Greek, Roman, Egyptian and Jewish and add to that mix this new, budding and growing movement around Jesus the Christ. It was a place of incredible religious diversity and cultural diversity. It was a place where religious syncretism was common; many would take some of one religion, some of another religion, mix them together and live in their own, unique devotional life. Religious movements were constantly trying to vie for acceptance, for inclusion, and had to demonstrate that they were worthy of considering. So the early Christians had to wonder, how were they going to share the gospel with this *kosmos*, with this world? What aspect of Christianity should they emphasize? What approach, what form of worship, what theological tenants, what philosophical system of thought should be shown off, lifted up and exposed for all to see? This must have been an almost insurmountable challenge for a movement that was so new, and trying to come to terms with its own identity. Many were trying to understand their own relationship with Judaism. Many were not clear if they were a new movement or an extension of Judaism. Are they sharing something new, or a new variation of something old? How were they to share the gospel with the world?

How do we share the gospel with the world? How do we tell the world about Jesus Christ? How do we share the hope and the joy and the peace we receive from our Lord? How do we share the gospel with the world? Fifty years ago this may not have seemed an urgent question. Fifty years ago the church was still an active and accepted part of the community and the life of the average citizen. Fifty years ago people went to church, people knew about the Bible, and all we had to do was open the doors for the people to come and worship. Yet Biblical literacy is dropping with each generation. The church is competing with other demands, with other groups and other movements for acceptance in our society. Many see our services as antiquated, our theology as off-putting and complicated, and our message as weak and irrelevant. We are facing a challenge, a struggle; how do we share the gospel with the world? How do we

share the gospel with this world, with this post-modern, pluralistic, relativistic society? How do we share the gospel in a culture that on one level is over-saturated with a cultural Christianity, and on another level is under-saturated with the gospel of Jesus Christ? How do we share the gospel with the world?

The theologian, H. Richard Niebuhr wrote a classic text about the relationship between Christ and culture (ironically named *Christ and Culture*). In this work he describes different relationships between the church and culture. On one end of the spectrum, the church is completely separate from culture and does not worry about sharing the gospel. On this side of the spectrum are groups of people like the Amish who only try to maintain their own identity by staying true to their strict understanding of what it means to be a Christian community. On the other end of the spectrum are churches that become a part of the culture, and work to find their place, their niche in the world. When I ask the question, how we share the gospel with the world, we find ourselves thinking with the churches who are trying to find their place in the world. Like moving to a new neighborhood, we want to figure out how to fit in. Like going to a new school we want to know what the styles, figures of speech, and other accepted patterns are so we can fit in. Like traveling to a different country, we want to learn the language and customs so we can fit in. We want to be accepted so that we can be heard. How do we share the gospel with the world?

Movement 2 – Showing Ourselves Off

It seems that we should closely conform to the world. It seems that we should find a way to be accepted by the world so that we can then share our message with the world. If we speak the language, if we show that we share some common values, if we have something to boast about, then maybe others will hear our message and come to know Jesus. It seems that we should closely conform to the world.

Some of the Christians of the Galatian church felt this was the proper path to walk. Some felt that they had to garb themselves with clothes that would be accepted by others in the community. So they pushed an acceptable view of Judaism mixed with Christianity to be practiced by these neophyte Christians. They wanted to say that they were perfect by the law so that they may be accepted by others. Other groups in Galatia already knew about Judaism, and might accept the teachings of Christ if they knew that it came out of this respected religion. Some of the Jews were skeptical of this new movement, and might be a little more open to accepting Christianity if they knew that they were still true to one of the central aspects of the Jewish tradition, the law. There were new, non-Jews joining in the movement and the movement was beginning to look chaotic and clumsy with its Jewish/Gentile mix. They had to show the world that there was a standard they lived by. They had to show the world that they expected their Gentile converts to live by the law. They had to show the world that this new movement was not as radical as others claimed it to be. So they pushed the idea and practice of circumcision. They pushed and practiced the ancient rite of initiation in order to conform to the law, in order to conform to the world, and in order to have something to brag about.

It seems that we should closely conform to the world. It feels like we are facing many of the similar problems that the early church in Galatia faced. We need to show the world that we can be trusted. We need to show the world that we can be understood. We need to put on the clothes of the world, conform to the world so that we can share the gospel with the world.

Maybe you have heard, and maybe you have been to some of the mega churches. I also refer to these churches as “steroid-churches” or “mall churches.” Maybe you have been to their coffee shops, their bookstores, and their miniature Disneyland playrooms for the children, their

spas, their restaurants, their mechanic shops, their souvenir and gift shops. Maybe you have been to the campus that looks as much like a mall as it does a church. These churches have clothed themselves with the world. They offer the amenities of the world, almost bragging that they are just like the world, except for the often use of the word God (not in vain), and the common occurrence of the cross. They can brag about their programs. They can brag about their common connection with culture. They can brag about their claim on the cultural trends, understanding of the cultural trends and use of the culture trends to reach an immense size. Most importantly, they can brag about their size. The worship is all about being big. It is all about having the largest band, the best organ, the most fantastic building. This is not a new phenomenon. The Cathedrals of old spoke of a desire to brag to the world in order to show to the world the message of Christ. It feels like Bart Simpson, riding on his skateboard, showing off and desiring the attention of all.

Maybe you have heard of those churches that are a little more subtle. These are emerging churches that try to keep a hand on the slight nuances of the culture. They worship in non-orthodox settings. They offer non-orthodox liturgy. The worship is driven by the questions of the culture, by the felt needs of the culture. They brag about their artistic diversity, the non-traditional approach, and the cutting edge aspects of this movement. It feels like Lisa Simpson, adopting a different style of clothing, a different style of speaking to gain acceptance.

Both of these types of churches seem to be doing something right. Both of these churches seem to be identifying with the culture in such a way that they are being heard. Maybe we also need to adjust and adapt. Maybe we also need to don the clothes of the world so that we can be accepted, attended and understood. Maybe we need to find the place where we can brag about our programs, our position, or our size. Maybe we should try to put on a show. Maybe we should change and adopt our speech patterns to those of the world. Then we can share the gospel.

Yet the theologian, Stanley Hauerwas claims that the church has conformed so much to the world, that it has lost its identity with Christ. He claims that in the church's effort to conform, it no longer has the unique claim to Christ but is pulled between Christ and the world.

I can't speak specifically to the mega churches or the emerging churches. I can't speak to their conviction to Christ, nor would I say that their approach is the wrong approach to take. We need to connect with the world. We need to be able to speak to the world, yet we have to be careful. It is so easy to slip from sharing the gospel to bragging about ourselves. It is so easy to slip from telling the world about Christ, and telling the world about us. If we can just tell others that we are the biggest, that we are the strongest, that we are the most right than we will be accepted. Maybe if we can just show that we follow the Law more closely than anyone else than we will be revered. Yet when our bragging is based on conditions created by the world then we are sowing in the flesh. When we brag about our accomplishments, our strengths, and our gifts then we are sowing in the flesh. This is what Paul warns about. Those who sow in the flesh will reap corruption in the flesh. Those who brag about their money, who place an emphasis on power, who demands to be right; who try to push others down will not reap from the Lord. The way of the world is the way of the flesh, and it is so easy to slip, to find ourselves falling into that way, and we and the church will only reap sorrow and suffering.

As individual Christians, it is easy to find ourselves sowing in the flesh. I remember once when I was at a summer camp as a youth I met these other youth who claimed to be Christians. Yet all week there was an ethos of trying to show who the best Christian was. The youth who could memorize the most verses, or the youth who could pray the longest out loud was considered the best Christian. Yet the whole premise was flawed because the idea of being the best in something is an idea that is based on the world. The world places its trust in the

accomplishments of the self; it places its trust in those who are seemingly the best by the world's standards. That week was the week with the most bickering, the most backbiting and the most animosity that I remember at a Christian camp.

Churches that are engaged in bitter behaviors, in angry arguments of justification, in distrustful actions, in demanding desires and in disputes are churches that are sowing in the flesh. They are full of Christians who are trying to show that they are right, that they are the best and that they are the ones who should be listened to the most closely. They are sowing the values of the world, of the *kosmos* in an attempt to be able to brag and show off to the world.

We want to be understood to the world, we want to be seen and known by the world, but it is so easy to slip past speaking in the language of the world to sowing all of our actions in the flesh. In our efforts to conform, we lose our identity as Christians, and gain an identity of people of the world bragging and showing off. The Galatians fell into this dangerous place. Many churches in the past have fallen into this dangerous place; we could fall into this dangerous place.

Movement 3 – The Embarrassing/Powerful Cross

Yet the cross calls us in a different direction. The cross calls us from the world to God. The cross calls us from culture to the creator. The cross calls us in a different direction.

Paul tries to remind the Galatians of the power of the cross. He reminds them that there is only one thing which anyone can boast about, and that is the cross of Jesus Christ. For without the cross they are nothing, but with the cross they are everything. Without the cross they are just creatures trying to stand on top of each other, but with the cross they are a new creation through the power of God.

Without the cross they are just people trying to compete as they live closer to the law. With the cross they are brought beyond the law to the grace of God.

Without the cross they are strangers, with the cross then are children of God.

Without the cross they are outcastes, with the cross they are included into God's family.

Without the cross they are sinners, with the cross they are redeemed.

Without the cross they are fallen, with the cross they are taken up and forgiven.

Without the cross they are people of the world, with the cross they are people of God.

They are a new creation, where circumcision means nothing, but where a new creation means everything. Paul calls them to remember, he reminds them who they are through Jesus Christ. Paul reminds the Galatians of the power of the cross.

This is our identity. We claim the power of the cross with the Galatians. We are a new people through the cross. We are given a new speech, a new way of living, and a new life. We are redeemed, we are forgiven, and we are blessed through the cross. Brothers and sisters, remember the way that Christ has set for you. Remember the love that Christ has offered you. Remember how Christ has forgiven you. We rest on the power of the cross; we gain our identity on the power of the cross. In the world you may be a nobody, but in the church of Jesus Christ you are a somebody because of the cross. In the world you may always wonder if you have done enough, or been good enough, but in the church Christ has done it for you. This is the power of the cross. This is the power we rest upon as a church as a people following God.

Yet in the same breath, Paul reminds the Galatians of the difficulties of the cross. In the same breath, Paul reminds the Galatians how Christ has been crucified by the world. Paul reminds the Galatians of the persecution that many endure for the sake of the cross. Paul reminds the Galatians that the world persecuted the cross and those who follow the cross for the sake of

Christ. Elsewhere in his writings to the Corinthian community, Paul writes about the foolishness of the cross. It is foolish to the Greeks and weakness to the Jews. The world cannot understand the power of the cross, because they see it as the place where our savior died. The world looks at the cross and sees shame. The world looks at the cross and sees defeat. The world looks at the cross and sees a waste of a life. The world cannot understand the cross, the world will not accept the cross, but will persecute and mock and reject the power that we claim. But we boast in the power of the cross.

In another place, Paul reminds the people that through the cross we claim that in our weakness we are made strong. Paul had a thorn, a weakness that plagued him and held him down, but through that weakness, God's strength was known. The great preacher, Gardner Taylor tells about a man who was stoned to death. He tells about that man looking up at the angry crowd around him, and at that moment when the man was at his weakness he could see the glory of the Lord. As the stones fell down to break his body, he looked up and saw the glory of body of Christ, whole and full and at the right side of God. It was a moment of disgrace for the world; it was a moment of glory for that man. Taylor goes on to ask the question of the world of what good could come out of that moment when this man, this saint, this Stephen fell to the crowds. Taylor then reminds us all that there was a man standing at the edge of the crowd holding the coats of those who were angrily throwing the stones. And this man saw the light of glory in the eyes of Stephen. He saw the light of glory in Stephen's eyes before he saw the glory for himself on that road to Damascus. There is power in the weakness of the cross.

We are persecuted to the world; we are crucified to the world through the cross. Yet that is what we brag about. We do not brag about the size of our choir, the preaching, and the programs. We do not show off how much we know, how much we can memorize, or how well we memorize doctrine. We brag about the cross, the symbol of weakness, the symbol of defeat and the symbol of life. We brag about the cross.

We are pulled by the world in one direction. We are pulled by the world to be the best and to show that we have the most. We are pulled by the world to try to live by the law, but the cross pulls us in a different direction. The cross pulls us to the grace and the glory of the Lord. Follow the cross, walk with Christ and rest only on him in your boasting and your bragging. Follow the direction of the cross.

Movement 4 – Spirit Formed Community

Through the cross we are a new community. We are a new creation; we are a new people through the cross. This is why Paul is so angry with the Galatians, and he is writing with such large letters. The Galatians are falling back to the way of the world. The Galatians are forgetting that they are made new through Christ. The Galatians are sowing in the flesh and forgetting about the Spirit.

So Paul is calling them to remember that through Christ they now have a new way of living that is not held down by the law. Paul is calling them to remember that they have a new way of living that is not conforming to the expectations of the world. Paul is reminding them that they are a new community that does not have to meet the approval of any outside groups or expectations of any other religious sects.

It reminds me of the movie *Fight Club*. In this movie the members of the club were given a new name. They were given a new way to live, to exist and to understand the world. They saw themselves as separate from the world. They saw themselves as working against the world. Through the teachings and leadership of one person, they became a new community.

When we say yes to Christ, we become a part of a new community. When we say yes to Christ we learn a new language to speak. When we say yes to Christ we are given a new way to live. The philosopher, Ludwig Wittgenstein claims that the language of the community shapes the identity and the truth values of that community. Our language changes, our identity changes and we change in the community of Christ. As Paul says, we are a new creation, not of the world, but of the Lord.

But we can still be tempted and tried. We can be tempted to try to find a way to boast to the world in the way of the world. We can be tempted to try to conform to the world in order to be accepted by the world. So let us continually be a community that is clothed by the spirit. Let us continually be a community that is surrounded by the grace of the Lord. Let us sow in the Spirit, and reap from the spirit. Earlier in Galatians, Paul lists the fruits of the Spirit: charity, joy, peace, goodness, generosity, gentleness, and faithfulness. This is what we gain by staying rooted in Christ.

When we find ourselves criticizing, judging, angry, bitter, resentful, and malcontent, then we are sowing in the flesh. Stay with the Spirit, sow in the Spirit, and reap the fruits of the Spirit, the fruits of eternal life. Sowing in the flesh places confidence in the flesh and the world. Sowing in the Spirit places confidence in the work of the Lord. Keep to the Spirit. Before we consider how to share the gospel, before we consider how to show the world the grace and the peace of the cross, let's make sure that we are staying true to the Lord through the Spirit.

Here are some things you can do to stay surrounded by the Holy Spirit. Pray. Pray often, asking God for help and direction. When you are angry, pray. When you are scared, pray. When you are confused, pray. When you are feeling full of joy, pray. Pray and you will stay connected to the Spirit. Pray the honest prayer, pray the simple prayer, just pray.

Read the scriptures. Read the actions and teaching of Jesus. Let the life of Jesus become a model for you as you try to live. Read the struggles of the early Christians in the letters of Paul and others. Be empowered by the convictions of those early Christians. Read the faith of Daniel, the joy of David, the conviction of Moses, and the trails of the prophets. Read the scriptures, not looking for the meaning but for the word of God. Don't ask, what does it mean, but instead ask, what God is saying to me through this holy word. Read the scriptures daily and you will be sowing in the Spirit.

Love others in the church. Love the people who sit around you, those who are in front and behind you. Love those who are across the sanctuary, those who attend every week and those who attend seldom. Love others in the church through kind words, through actions of grace and charity, and through peace. Love others in the church by praying for them. Especially, love the ones who rub you the wrong way. The one who you find the most annoying (and that does happen in the church), the one that you try to avoid is the one you need to pray for the most. The one you find the most irritating is the one you need to do the most for. Love others and you will be sowing in the Spirit.

We are a new community but we must work at being a new community. We are a new people but we must work at being a new people. Sow in the Spirit, let yourself be surrounded by the Spirit, and we will be the new community created and graced by God.

Movement 5 – Standing on Higher Ground

We will be standing on higher ground. We will be standing on the ground of righteous, even if it is just for a moment. We will be standing on the ground of grace and redemption and peace, even if it is only for a passing time. When we surround ourselves with the Spirit we will

be standing on higher ground. And then we can start to talk about sharing the gospel with the world. When we work at speaking a language of righteousness then we can start sharing the gospel with the world. When we work at praying and loving then we can share the gospel with the world. When we stand up for peace and mercy then we can start sharing the gospel with the world.

We won't share the gospel through boasting of what we have or what we can offer. We won't share the gospel through power or wealth or prestige. We won't share the gospel through importance or presence. We will share the gospel through the power of the cross as it affects our own lives.

When we become a community, sowing in the Spirit, when we find ourselves standing on a different level, then our light will shine and the world will see it. We will be the light on the hill, and the world will notice it. Many will not understand it, but those who do, will respond to the power of the cross.

Let us work as a people to be the people of God. Let us work as a people to continue to follow Christ. The world will pull at us, the world will tempt and lure us, but we will stay true and stay to the higher ground of the Lord. Let us continue to follow the call and the way of the cross, saying and claiming:

I'm pressing on the upward way.
New heights I'm gaining every day
Still praying as I onward bound,
Lord plant my feet on higher ground.

Lord, lift me up and let me stand, by faith, on heaven's tableland,
A higher plane than I have found,
Lord plant my feet on higher ground.

AMEN