

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, November 13, 2016**

WHY WITNESSING MATTERS

Romans 10:14-21

Before turning to Romans, permit me to offer a sort of post-mortem on the surprising – some would say stunning, even shocking – results of last Tuesday’s presidential election. The vast majority of pundits and pollsters fully expected Hillary Clinton to become the 45th President of the United States and, thus, the first woman in the history of our republic to serve as President. Perhaps no one was more shocked by the outcome than Mrs. Clinton herself. At best, I can only begin to imagine her thoughts and feelings as election night unfolded and she saw the presidency slipping out of her hands. It must have been an incredibly difficult night for her. And, judging by the reaction, for her supporters as well.

The reactions to Donald Trump’s electoral victory have spanned a wide spectrum both for the American electorate as a whole and for evangelical Christians in particular. Some Americans, of course, are elated that Mr. Trump won – or, more to the point in many cases, that Mrs. Clinton lost. Many Americans who were sure Mrs. Clinton would win are in stunned disbelief at the outcome. For many others, there is a huge sense of relief that she did not win.

There is, however, much angst and fear on the parts of many over the prospects of Mr. Trump’s presidency and what it will mean, particularly for African-Americans, Hispanics, other immigrants, and women who feel devalued, disrespected, and threatened by the racist, ethno-centric, bullying, demeaning, lewd, and body-shaming words and attitudes of the President-Elect. These feelings of vulnerability and fear are totally understandable, and whether you voted for Mr. Trump or not, we who belong to Christ and His church *must* speak up for those who have been demeaned. We *must* stand with those who feel alienated or frightened by the rhetoric of Mr. Trump, declaring and demonstrating that there is no place in the church or in our nation or its policies for such words, attitudes, or actions.

Exit polls indicate that 81 percent of white evangelicals voted for Mr. Trump. I am certain that the evangelical Christians who voted for him did so not *because of* these things, nor *because of* his blatant sexual immorality or other sins, but *in spite of* them. Not all evangelical Christians (or American, in general) who voted for him did so with enthusiasm. The same is true of Hillary Clinton voters. In many cases, it was a vote against the other candidate as we chose the candidate we judged to be the lesser of two evils. Or, we cast our vote for a third-party or write-in candidate.

I have heard and read many diverse responses to the election in the last several days. One that resonates with my heart comes from Justin Taylor, a publisher with Crossway Books, who also blogs at The Gospel Coalition. He writes: “I feel *relief* that Hillary Clinton will never nominate a Supreme Court justice.” (Perhaps you feel relief about this, too. I do.) “I feel *empathy* for those evangelicals who voted for Trump on the calculus of the better of two bad choices, but I feel great *frustration* at evangelical leaders who excused his many sins ... and tried to make a positive case for Trump’s virtues as commander in chief. I feel a deep *sadness*

for our minority brothers and sisters who feel further alienation from white evangelicals who excused Trump's racism and misogyny." (I do, too. We must make it clear that there is *no excuse* for racism or the mistreatment of women. Ever. Amen?) "Finally, I (have) *hope*. We do not put out trust in such rulers, but in the reign of our Lord (Psalm 146), praying for our leaders so that we (may) be free to live peaceful, quiet, godly, dignified lives for the earthly and eternal good of our neighbors (1 Timothy 2:1-2)."

It is intuitively obvious, isn't it, that we are a nation divided. There are deep wounds in our society that cannot be ignored. We cannot live in denial. It is not surprising, really, that there have been protests and demonstrations in a number of cities since Election night. But we must say – and say it loud and clear – that there is absolutely no place for violence and destruction in response to the election results. As God's people, we must speak out against it. It would be good if not only Donald Trump, but Hillary Clinton and President Obama were to speak out against it, too.

As we move forward from here, we must remember, as Chuck Colson used to say, that "salvation doesn't come on Air Force One." Amen? Our hope is not in whoever happens to occupy the Oval Office. Our hope for change, for peace, for salvation, for the healing of our land, for the present and the future – our hope is in the Lord Jesus Christ, our Savior from heaven. Our hope lies in the truth that God is sovereign and Jesus Christ is risen.

As we move forward, we must also be careful what we say and how we say it in our communication with others. If you're on Facebook, you know that a lot of angry, intemperate, inappropriate political rants get posted and liked and reposted. If you're on Twitter, you know the same thing is true with tweets. Sometimes these rants come from professing Christians, who evidently don't realize how their posts or tweets damage their witness to Christ. Please be careful what you post on social media. Please consider how your words – whether on social media or in conversation with others – reflect on the Lord Jesus Christ and the credibility of your witness.

Take to heart this biblical instruction that comes from Ephesians 4:29-32: "Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you."

Do you hear that? Not only can your words do real harm to people made in God's image, you can actually grieve the Holy Spirit – you can grieve the heart of God Himself – by the words you speak, by the emails you send, by the things you post and the comments you make on Facebook and Twitter. Think before you speak or communicate on social media. Even better is to pray before you do it. Let your words and your life as a whole reflect the life and love and heart of the Lord Jesus Christ.

In addition, take to heart and put into practice the instruction of God's Word found in Colossians 3:12-15, where Paul says: "Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly

loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body” – the body of Christ – “you were called to peace. And be thankful.”

Regardless of who is in the White House, regardless of which party is in power, these are the virtues and qualities that are to characterize our lives and relationships as followers of the Lord Jesus Christ and citizens of the Kingdom of God. If we exhibit these qualities in our relationships with each other and with others, including those with whom we disagree (or those who disagree with us), it *will* make a difference for good in the life of our nation.

One more thing we must do going forward is to commit ourselves to pray for our nation and for our President-Elect and his family. I urge you to pray specifically for the salvation of Donald Trump and his family. Mr. Trump has said he is a Christian, but it is clear from his lifestyle, words, and attitudes that he is not living as a follower of Jesus Christ. When he says he has never asked God for forgiveness, he shows that he does not understand either the message of the gospel or his own need for a Savior. So, let us pray for President-Elect Trump and for his family to have ears to hear the gospel, to respond to the message of God’s saving power, love, and grace in trusting faith, and to become true followers of the Lord Jesus Christ. Will you make this your prayer?

Let’s pray, too, for Hillary Clinton and her family as they deal with a defeat that not many people saw coming. This must be a terribly painful time for her. I don’t know the condition of her soul. I can only draw fallible conclusions based on her actions and the public policies she has advocated. Pray for the well-being of her soul. Pray that the peace of Christ will rule in her heart.

And let’s pray for our nation as well, for all our leaders, and for our fellow Americans in these tumultuous times. We may and should give thanks to God for the peaceful transfer of power from one administration to another, which is one of the great hallmarks of our republic. We have been extraordinarily blessed as a people in this great land, but we cannot deny that not all is well with America. There has been, and continues to be, a great turning away from God in our national life – a turning away that grieves the heart of God and should grieve the hearts of all God’s people. Let us pray that this turning away from God will be replaced by a tremendous turning back to God in our public life and institutions, as well as in the transformation of individual lives, families, and communities through the message of the gospel, which is “the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes” (Romans 1:16). Let us pray for renewed spiritual vitality in Christ’s church, and for a new God-inspired and God-honoring reformation in every sector of our society. And let us guard our hearts against the sin of pride, the error of thinking that the problems of America are entirely out there and not at all in us. May the Lord forgive us and deliver us from the folly of thinking that we’re OK and that the responsibility for America’s troubles lies with everyone else.

This is what I felt the Lord wanted me to say to you today.

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But I do want to look briefly at Romans 10:14-15, just two verses, since there is not sufficient time to look in-depth at the rest of the chapter. So please turn to Romans 10:14-15 in your Bible, electronic device, or the Pew Bible. May we give our full and reverent attention to this reading of God's holy Word.

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What Paul says beginning in verse 14 about the importance of evangelism – call it the importance of witnessing or sharing the gospel, if you prefer – flows out of the preceding verses that reach their climax in verse 13, where, quoting the Old Testament prophet Joel, Paul says that “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” (Romans 10:13; Joel 2:32).

By a series of rhetorical questions in verses 14 and 15, Paul shows us how and why our witness to the gospel matters. He has already shown us in verses 1-13 that “to be salvaged from the wreck of humanity,” as Ray Stedman put it – that is, to be rescued from the wreck we have made of our lives and of this world in our stubborn rebellion against God – “you have to call on the name of the Lord” in faith. “*Everyone* who calls on the name of the Lord in this way” – in true repentance and faith, trusting in Jesus Christ and His saving work on the cross for us – “*will be saved.*” (Emphasis added.) *Will* receive the gift of salvation and eternal life, a gift that comes free of charge to people like you and me who don't deserve it and never will. It's a good deal, if I ever saw one!

This declaration in verse 13 prompts a litany of rhetorical questions in verses 14 and 15:

- Calling on the Lord Jesus in faith brings salvation, yes; but how can you call on His name if you don't believe in Him?
- How can you believe in Jesus if you have never heard of Him or the message about Him?
- How can you hear the message unless someone tells you, unless someone shares the gospel with you or gives a witness to the Lord Jesus and His saving work for us?
- And how will the message get out, how will anyone share the gospel or spread the good news, unless they are commissioned and sent by God?

To turn it around, Paul says it like this:

- Unless messengers or witnesses to the gospel are commissioned and sent out, no one will share the gospel with those who desperately need it (which is all of us).
- Unless the gospel is proclaimed, no one will hear the message of Christ and His saving love.
- Unless people hear the gospel, they will not believe it.
- Unless they believe, they will not call on the name of the Lord who can save them.
- Unless they call on His name in repentance and faith, they will not be saved.

In the sovereign plan of God, this chain of events is necessary for the salvation of unbelievers. God did not have to do it this way. But this is ordinarily the way He brings unbelievers to saving faith. Calling on the Lord for salvation depends on believing in Him. Believing in Him depends on knowing about Him. Knowing about Him depends on hearing. Hearing depends on telling. It depends on our witness, our communication of the gospel message. And telling depends on being commissioned and sent by God. This, says Paul, is why evangelism matters. It is why personal witnessing matters. It is why sharing the gospel with others matters. It matters because it is the means God has sovereignly chosen to bring sinful, unbelieving men and women to salvation and new life in Him.

And it is a privilege, a high and holy privilege, to be the human instruments God chooses to use in this chain of events through which God draws unbelievers to Himself in faith.

The NIV and other translations use the language of “preach” and “preaching” in verses 14 and 15, which may give the impression that the task of evangelism or witnessing is solely or primarily the domain of professional preachers, such as pastors or evangelists or missionaries who go to foreign lands. No! Think about the Great Commission given by Jesus to “go and make disciples of all nations ...” (Matthew 28:19). To whom was the Great Commission given? It was given initially to the Eleven Disciples (the Twelve minus Judas). But was it for them alone? No! It was and is for all of Jesus’ followers in all times and places. It was and is for the church and for each of us as members of Christ’s church.

We all have different gifts, different interests, and different temperaments. So we have different ways, different styles, of witnessing to our faith in Christ. But we all have a share in the Great Commission. We all share in the “search and rescue mission” for spiritually lost people that Ken Priddy spoke about a few weeks ago.

As Paul lays out the chain of events by which a person comes to faith in Jesus Christ, he is simultaneously describing the role of believers – the role of the church as a whole and of every member of it – in God’s plan for reaching those who do not yet believe in Him. Do you see that?

You and I do not have the power to make anyone a believer. We cannot make a single sinner repent, no matter how eloquent our witness or how Christ-like our lives. Only God can make it happen. Only God can “birth” faith and repentance in someone’s heart. No one will ever come to faith in Christ unless God draws them. But He uses us in the process. He uses our witness. He uses our faltering attempts to explain the greatness of the gospel. He uses our acts of service and our prayers.

Let me leave you with this today. Even though she was born in southern California and grew up in Dallas, Putti Sok described herself as a “Cambodian Buddhist girl.” She said: “I figured I was Buddhist because my parents told me I was Buddhist. I thought Christianity was just a religion for Americans.” She eventually came to think of herself as “an evangelistic atheist,” challenging others to prove that God exists.

When she started college at the University of Texas, one of her goals was to build deep relationships. She succeeded, but some of her new friends turned out to be Christians who were active in a student ministry. These friends prayed for her, even after she told them to leave her alone and quit praying for her.

At one point in her sophomore year, though, Putti hit a wall. She began to see that everything she was doing was meaningless. “If what I was doing didn’t have eternal meaning,” she said, “then it was all in vain.” She began to think that if God is really real, He would be able to hear her prayers. She began praying each night that God would help her understand what she had been hearing from her friends – their witness to the gospel – because it seemed like foolishness to her.

Then one day Putti entered a closet in the student ministry building that had been turned into a prayer room. Inside she found a bowl filled with pieces of paper on which students had written the names of their friends for whom they were praying. On one slip of paper after another she found her own name.

Despite how strongly she had urged her friends not to pray for her, they had continued to love her and pray for her anyway. She burst into tears that day in the tiny prayer room. God was softening her heart. The next night, sensing that God was asking her for a specific response, she prayed to receive Christ as her Lord and Savior.

“All of a sudden,” she said, “I had a desire to go and share (the gospel) with people. God is real, and He has changed my heart.”

Putti Sok, and millions of other spiritually lost people like her all around us and all around the world, is the reason why witnessing matters. After all, everyone who calls on the name of the Lord in faith will be saved. But how can they call on the one in whom they have not believed? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone to tell them? And how can someone tell them unless they are sent?

Yes, how beautiful are the feet of those who bring the good news!

Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.