

Taking the Gospel Around Lake County & Around the World

by Marcus Johnson • CEF Banquet at Cornerstone Community Church, Wadsworth, IL • November 3rd, 2017

These yearly banquets for CEF are always an inspiration to many of us. The fellowship is enriching, the food delicious, and the music uplifting, all of which adds to the inspiring testimonies we hear regarding what God is doing around Lake County and around the world thru CEF.

We are also grateful to Cornerstone Community Church for generously providing your building once again for this banquet. And I'd like to take this opportunity on behalf of Lake Region Bible Church in Round Lake, to publically thank Cornerstone for your generosity to us. Many of you remember the blizzard we had in Feb of 2011, w/ 20 inches of snow. Long story short, about 10 days before that blizzard hit, Cornerstone gave our church an old Chevy Blazer with a snow plow. The Blazer has since worn out, but the snow plow still works great, and that gift has blessed us and saved our church a lot of money. Thanks again & we're grateful to you for your partnership in the gospel.

Now by way of encouragement & exhortation, in light of Child Evangelism Fellowship's 80yrs of evangelistic ministry, tonight's Around the World, Around Lake County theme, and amidst the ongoing challenge of taking the gospel to every nation, tonight we will consider some foundational principles of evangelism, based on a few Scripture passages, beginning in Romans chp 1.

Evangelism is proclaiming the evangel, the good news of Jesus, more commonly referred to in English as the gospel. Evangel & gospel both mean good news. And the title for our message tonight is as follows: Taking the Gospel around Lake County & Around the World.

Here in Romans 1 the Apostle Paul is writing to Christians living in Rome. He has already shared his longing to come and see them, and the calling & obligation he has to preach the gospel, Starting in v15, Paul says the following: ¹⁵ So I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome. ¹⁶ For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. ¹⁷ For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith" (ESV). Let's pray...

Tonight we will consider 3 key principles related to gospel ministry & global missions, to encourage and exhort us all in the ongoing work of evangelism. These are by no means an exhaustive list. There are many important truths & commands related to evangelism, such as the priority of the local church, or the ongoing call to make disciples. Both of which CEF is devoted to. So along with these & many other things which could be mentioned, here's 3 main topics Scripture emphasizes related to evangelism...

1st, Be Bold in God's Gospel: it's Revelation & Life-transforming Power

One of the many things CEF has going for her is the priority she gives to the gospel: the message Paul says he is not ashamed of. When we think about what the gospel says & what the gospel does, it becomes obvious why Paul is not ashamed of it.

God's gospel is the good news about Jesus Christ the Son of God, who is Lord of all. A message that threatened the Roman Empire, who viewed Caesar as Lord. It's a gospel that proclaims the righteous character & judgment of the Creator, our faithful covenant keeping God, who demonstrated His love for us in this: that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us. And it's the gospel that proclaims the good news of how sinners can be saved, and made right with God, and how God can forgive sinners & remain righteous. As Paul says, in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed from/for faith.

This Jesus who saves us is Israel's long awaited Messiah, who stepped into human history. He became man and lived the righteous life we've all failed to live, loving His Father, doing the Father's will, and revealing the Father to the lost, teaching this gospel message with authority and performing miracles, loving the rich and the poor, women and men, Jews & Gentiles, dying the death we deserve, rising from the dead, ascending to heaven, sending the Holy Spirit to empower us for godly living and gospel witness, reigning as our High Priest, as the one who has all authority in heaven and on earth, and who is with us even to the end of the age.

This gospel is the good news about this Jesus who came to fulfill the promises of God, the Christ who has come to defeat Satan, sin and death, and will make all things new with the consummation of His kingdom, when He returns to judge the living and the dead, to liberate the poor & oppressed & save those who are waiting for Him, ushering in a new heaven and earth, unto the eternal glory of God! Hallelujah! And all of this is offered to anyone who will put their faith in Jesus Christ as Lord, and call on Him as Savior to forgive your sins & give you life in His name. What a gospel to be bold about – God's Revelation & Life-transforming Power.

By all means, we should take seriously our call to be faithful and effective in reaching out to a lost world, & I'll share some words in a few minutes about that priority. But the power in evangelism is not primarily found in how great our witness is, or the skills we have, but in the gospel itself, which saves & transforms lives.

The gospel that CEF is devoted to and that many of us labor for, is the gospel Paul says is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes. Let's give thanks to God for the 80yrs He has worked powerfully thru CEF. Some churches & parachurch ministries are not bold about the gospel, because ironically – and astonishingly – they no longer believe it. By God's grace CEF has not gone down that road.

However, amidst the daily grind of life & ministry, & b/c of the evil one's attacks, we can forget or lose the passion we've had for the gospel: it's revelation & power. We can get discouraged when our eyes are too much on ourselves, and how limited we are in our gifts, and how feeble our efforts can feel, in light of the heavy burden of reaching a very lost world full of sinners with messy, complicated & overwhelming problems in life. So be refreshed & reminded tonight – God's revelation & power is in the gospel!

Along with the challenges of daily life & ministry, we can also find ourselves lacking boldness because of our own sinfulness. We know how far we've fallen short of God's glory. Who are we to tell the world how to live? CEF is part of the evangelical subculture here in the U.S., & we have a lot of flaws. The sins of the world are sins we find in our own hearts & in the church: pride, love of money, immorality, racism, discrimination, political or entertainment driven idolatry, slander, divisiveness, gossip, operating in fear and so forth.

We need to own up to our failures, past & present, confront ourselves & our churches first, & humbly repent, so that we are not confronting the world with a gospel we ourselves are not obeying. Part of our gospel witness comes by us repenting and humbling ourselves when we've been wrong; and when we don't, this hinders our gospel witness. For we are one beggar telling another beggar where to find the bread.

But as we walk in repentance & humility – because of God's grace; and thru Christ's righteousness; and in the Spirit's power, we can & we should be bold about the gospel. Not because we are so good, but because God is so great.

There's one another reason I'll mention, regarding why we're tempted to be ashamed rather than bold about of the gospel: Fear – we are afraid. We fear the world's hostility or rejection, a world which mocks the Bible, its teachings, & us Christians. Or we fear rejection by those in the church who refuse to surrender to Jesus as Lord. Let's repent as needed, asking God's forgiveness and His Spirit to embolden us. Let's be inspired by Paul's life & his words "I am not ashamed of the gospel..." – The Paul who was imprisoned, shipwrecked, beaten, and ultimately gave his life for the gospel.

As God's word goes forth, sinners hear God's call and put their faith in Jesus. We are forgiven, we are set free from the guilt, shame and power of sin, we find the ultimate purpose and joy in life thru knowing & worshiping God, we are united with other believers in Christ's love, adopted into the family of God, and daily transformed into Christ-likeness, with an unshakeable peace that is not dependent on our circumstances, with a new found joy in giving glory to God and not ourselves, and we now have the hope of eternal life after death.

Why in the world would we be ashamed of that? Some of those who are hostile to the gospel today will be bowing their knees to the Lord Jesus and proclaiming that gospel tomorrow. So 1st, let's be bold about God's gospel: and it's life-transforming power.

2nd, Trust in God's Word: as we teach the Scriptures to Children

Speaking thru Isaiah the prophet, in chp 55, God says about His word which goes forth: ¹¹...it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it (ESV). Let us trust that God's word will do what God's word says: it will not return empty, it will accomplish God's purposes.

Some churches & ministries no longer give focus to the priority of the Word. They've lost conviction that the Scriptures are the inspired, inerrant word of God, thru which God accomplishes His work in the human heart and in the world. By the very nature of who CEF is and what she does. God's word is a priority in this ministry. Amen.

Yet in teaching the Scriptures, and in gospel ministry overall, we can grow tired or discouraged because we are often sowing more than we are reaping. Even for those of you who get to see children profess faith in Christ, because CEF is an outreach oriented ministry, you often are not part of these kids' lives as they grow up in the faith. We believe theologically that we should trust God's word, but our trust lacks a conviction that God's word does a work in the lives of those who hear, a transforming work of holiness, healing & freedom that cannot be received without the ministry of God's word. Or we might lack the joy that should come with teaching God's word, even when there's far more sowing than reaping. Be encouraged tonight; take joy in the fact that you are working in a ministry that is devoted to God's word. Trust His word to do His work as you teach children.

We also get overwhelmed with the magnitude of problems children & families face. This causes some ministries to give priority to other important things at the expense of teaching God's word. There are numerous parachurch ministries in Lake County and around the world, which are doing good works that CEF is not doing. Crisis Pregnancy centers like Informed Choices, gang prevention & intervention ministries like Frontline Street Intervention, and so forth.

We need these ministries, as the church must minister to the whole person. And CEF does do some charitable & relief ministry around the world. But CEF has a unique calling – thru her partnership with local churches, teaching the Scriptures to children, some of whom do not belong to a church.

Paul highlights the importance of Scripture being taught to children in 2 Timothy. He reminds Timothy that his sincere faith first dwelt in his grandmother Lois and his mother Eunice. Then Paul goes on to say in chp 3:¹⁴ **But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it¹⁵ and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus (ESV).**

Some of the kids CEF reaches do not have a grandmother Lois or a mother Eunice teaching them the Scriptures at home. You might be the only one who teaches them God's word in their childhood. Or that newsletter you stuff & that board mtg you attend, might lead to another club starting, and a child coming and hearing the Scriptures for the very first time.

So for those of you teaching & volunteering in the clubs, CYIA, Lake County Fair or the Christmas parties, taking time out of your busy schedules to prepare lessons & invest in kids, going out on those cold winter afternoons, or those hot summer days, persevering when kids are complacent or distracted, and for all those involved with CEF, who are doing the behind the scenes work that gets little fanfare, or those promoting CEF in your churches and schools. May we all be encouraged tonight to trust in God's word as we keep teaching the Scriptures to children so that they might come to know the living Christ.

And for anyone here tonight who's not sure of where you stand before God, let me ask: Have you put your faith in Jesus Christ who is Lord of all? Have you called on His name to be your Savior and save you from your sins, from God's wrath & the judgment our righteous God demands, and the eternal punishment we are headed for in hell. When Christ died on the cross God's wrath was appeased and the penalty of sin was paid for. God is a righteous God who will not let sin go unpunished. And Christ rose from the dead and offers us eternal life in His kingdom: life which begins now and will be experienced in full when Christ returns. Call on His name. Repent & believe. You can make that surrender of faith right now as I'm speaking. Put your faith in Christ, and when you do so, tell someone. Profess with your moth Jesus is Lord as you believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead. Halleljuah!

So our 1st main point, Be Bold in God's gospel: it's revelation & life-transforming power.
2nd, Trust God's word as we teach the Scriptures to children. And then...

3rd, Engage our Ever-changing Culture: with the Unchanging Gospel

To take the gospel around Lake County, not to mention around the world, we need to do the hard work of ministry even as we depend on God & not ourselves. Earlier we saw that our power is not in how skilled we are in sharing the gospel. However, this doesn't mean we can be lazy in our evangelistic efforts.

Paul says in 1 Corinthians 9 that he became a servant to all people, becoming like those he is trying to reach, the Jews, those under the law, those outside the law, and the weak, and then he sums it up saying:²² **... I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some.²³ I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings (ESV).** God has given CEF favor in various places and in different ways. Year after year in our church's weekly prayer meetings, we hear Gail share about the open doors CEF has in the public schools of Lake County. What a great way to engage the culture and reach un-churched children. With that in mind, here's a few practical ways CEF and all Christians can continue engaging our ever-changing culture with the unchanging gospel.

First, pray evangelistically: Pray like Paul in Eph 6 or Col 4. Pray for open doors, for the gospel to go forth. Pray for boldness to share the gospel, & for clarity in our witness. This sounds very simple and obvious, but are we doing it? Pray for favor with the schools, principles, teachers, parents and

kids. Gospel ministry and teaching the Scriptures is a direct assault & threat to the evil one. We need to be pray evangelistically for boldness, clarity & open doors.

Second, love our neighbors and our enemies: Christians should love people because God has first loved us, He commanded us to, and He pours His love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit which empowers us to do so. No matter how much our culture changes or what background someone comes from, people of all walks of life want to be loved, especially children.

My wife Gwen & I with our 3 kids have enjoyed living in Round Lake Beach for the last 15yrs. Our home is a block away from one of the schools where we have a Good News Club. When we would walk our dog Clifford around the block, some of these kids who recognize our daughter Amy would come running up to see Amy & Clifford. And you can hear the excitement in their voices & see the look in their eyes: they love going to the Good News Clubs, and they are hungry for attention, to be loved, to know they are included and cared for. And this call to love is for all those CEF comes in contact with: The principles, teachers & staff at the schools, the parents, and so forth, especially when we face hostility or rejection – respond in love.

Once in awhile CEF gets attention in the news media, locally or nationally, because of some controversy. This is an opportunity for gospel witness. CEF does the work of evangelism – so Expect hostility and respond in love. We should not hope that doors are closed or persecution comes upon us. We should stand up for the free exercise of religion, for all people, and work hard in a humble-loving way to keep the doors open in the schools.

Yet we should also recognize that when the culture and the government is too friendly with the church, this can also cause problems: We are more likely to end up overly comfortable, prideful & self-sufficient, and less likely to identify with the poor & oppressed, immigrants & refugees. We become more consumed with our worldly-American way of life than we are passionate about living as sojourners in a world that is not our home. God uses the hostility we face to sanctify us and enhance our gospel witness. In 1 Peter 3 we see that if we honor Christ as Lord & suffer well, unbelievers take notice, and ask us for the reason for the hope that we have. Peter says we should share that gospel hope with gentleness & respect.

Do you remember how the Amish caught the attention of our nation back in 2006, on that horrible October day when 10 children were shot & five of them killed in an Amish school in Lancaster County, PA? And how several of the Amish went to the funeral of the shooter, and extended their love and forgiveness to the shooter's family? A love & forgiveness that the shooter's mother Terri publically shares has continued long after the tragedy was over. Thank God for the Amish. When our culture thinks about Evangelical Christians, is that the type of love that comes to their mind? By God's grace there are thousands of believers in our country loving our neighbors & our enemies. May they know we are Christians by our love.

Responding in love during a tragedy is by no means the only opportunity we have. There are times CEF faces unfair criticism, closed doors, & hostility. Let's follow the example of Sand Springs Baptist Church in Athens TX, in how they responded to a well known local atheist named Patrick Greene. Mr. Greene has a history of suing local governments, politicians and churches. Last year he sued Abundant Life Fellowship in Corpus Christi TX, because a local mayor & city officials attended the ground breaking ceremony for the 230ft cross the church planned to build on its own property.

Back in the spring of 2012, there was a similar incident where Mr. Greene threatened a lawsuit against Henderson County, TX because of a public display of a manger scene. While threatening this lawsuit, Patrick found out he had a detached retina. Long story short, Sand Springs Baptist Church of Athens TX took up a collection of over \$400 to help him and his wife Karen with some immediate

needs. Their love did not produce lasting change in Patrick, but it did bear witness to the gospel, which was highlighted by the news media throughout our nation. News media outlets like the Athens Review reported that Patrick was flabbergasted to hear these Christians were going to help him, and he ended up paying to have a star hung up above the Nativity scene he originally was trying to have removed thru a law suit. When we face hostility, our focus should not be on how wrong the world is, but rather the opportunity this is for us to love our neighbors and bear witness to the gospel, and be reminded of how dependent we are on Christ.

So, to engage the ever changing culture with the unchanging gospel, let us pray evangelistically, let us love our neighbors & our enemies, and here's one last example: one that is also a fitting end to all 3 of our main points of tonight: being bold in the gospel, trusting God's word & engaging the culture:

Third, think deeply about the Gospel as we proclaim the Supremacy of Christ.

By God's grace I became a Christian in 1986 & have been a pastor since 1996. Every year, I learn more about the gospel and how to share it. Let's not assume the gospel or get comfortable in how we proclaim it. There's a reason CEF offers ongoing training & comes up w/ new ways of sharing the good news. The gospel has a simplicity to it – such that a child can understand & believe. If that wasn't true we might not have CEF.

But the gospel is also the overarching theme of the entire Bible, which includes deep, rich theological topics mentioned earlier: Like Christ as Israel's Messiah & the fulfillment of God's promises; Or the kingdom of God which calls us to repent of our cultural & political idols; Or the gift of the Holy Spirit, which sets us free from the power of sin, and Who gives us love for our neighbors and our enemies; Or the call for racial reconciliation, as God who reconciles us with Himself is and will reconcile people of every tribe & language with one another; Or the Second coming of Christ, which is part of the gospel message, it's not just end-time theology. Not only is Christ the only way to heaven, but He is the only one who is coming back to earth to judge the living and the dead. Are you ready to meet Him when He returns to usher in His kingdom?

One of the ways we most effectively reach the culture around us is to think deeply & theologically about the gospel and to share the fullness of this gospel message. As we teach the Scriptures throughout the year, let us ask ourselves – are there topics in the gospel that we haven't covered in awhile, or that we don't give as much attention to? Ones that might be especially relevant to children?

Here's one example: when we believe in Christ, we are adopted into the family God. Some of the Good News Club kids come from broken homes & are hungry to be accepted. Some of them might be foster kids or adopted as infants. And maybe they do have a loving family, but because it's not their biological family, they might have a sense of missing out on what others take for granted. If we are in Christ, not only are we forgiven, but we now belong to God's family.

It's like that analogy, if you are standing guilty of murder before the Judge in a court of law, and not only has the Judge's Son paid your penalty, and set you free from the death sentence you deserve, the Judge Himself adopts you as His son or daughter into His family. The verdict is not that you're declared not guilty, & simply freed from punishment. Rather, He declares you righteous, you now deserve a reward, & you go home with the Judge that very night, as His adoptive child, to feast at His table. You are now a co-heir with His Son who died for you, rose again, gives you new life & reigns forever! Proclaiming adoption as part of the good news of the gospel helps all of us and especially those who have been adopted or those who don't have a loving family, to more fully experience how the gospel is good news.

As we share the fullness of the gospel message, let us exalt the supremacy of Christ. Spend time talking about Jesus, the most captivating & intriguing person of all. CEF Europe came out with a new evangelistic booklet called "Meet the King." It is the story of the Lord Jesus Christ, His birth, ministry on Earth, crucifixion, resurrection and ascension. It ends w/ a clear explanation of how to trust Jesus Christ as Savior and King.

Compared to 30yrs or 40yrs ago, the average child in America knows very little about the life of Jesus, not to mention the true unfolding story of the OT. So when we tell kids today to put their faith in Jesus who died on the cross, many of them do not have a knowledge about Jesus & His life upon which to believe. Spending time talking about the person and life of Jesus is important not only because our culture has changed, and doesn't know much about Jesus, but also because proclaiming the supremacy of Christ is one of the dominant ways the Bible itself reveals the gospel, the message that introduces us to a person, His name is Jesus.

The entire OT is pointing to Christ who fulfills it, a true story that engages the culture. Jesus is the last Adam who was faithful thru temptation in the wilderness; He is the woman's offspring who will crush the serpent's head; He is Abraham's seed who will bless all people from all nations; He is the Passover lamb who saves us from the slavery of sin & eternal judgment; Jesus is God who is with us, who became flesh and tabernacled among us; He is the true Son of God who Israel failed to be; He is the Son of Man who is both the suffering servant as well as David's heir who will reign over all nations and forever.

Along with the OT, think about how the NT begins with Matthew, Mark, Luke & John. How do these authors share the gospel? They spend time talking about Jesus: His birth, His authoritative teaching & miracles, His love for the Father & His love for sinners, His captivating and awe inspiring presence, His kingdom which rebukes the rebellion & treason of sinners and demands our total allegiance to His lordship & reign; and His offensive claims about Himself being God, and the way of the cross for all who would follow Him, claims that led to His own death on the cross. One of the best ways to reach our ever-changing & largely unchurched culture is to proclaim the supremacy of Christ as we teach the Scriptures to children.

Through Jesus Christ: the Eternal God steps into time; the God through whom all people were created is formed in the womb; the God who owns a cattle on a thousand hills has no place to lay His head; the God who is Lord over time waits for His time to come. the God of consuming fire surrenders to His enemies; the LORD of the Scriptures submits to Scripture's authority; the God who spoke the universe into existence speaks not a word in His own defense; the imperishable God is crucified by those who are perishing; the God who clothes the lilies of the field hangs naked between two thieves; the God who breathed life into man gives up His last breath; the God to whom all things belong buys us back with His own blood.

Through Jesus Christ: the Ever-Living God comes back to life; the God who sits at the right hand of Majesty lives within me; the God who fulfilled the law through weakness and humility will overthrow the man of lawlessness by the splendor of His coming; and through Jesus Christ the Carpenter's Son, the God who was nailed to a cross for six hours will be worshipped for all eternity as the Lord of lords. Hallelujah!

By God's grace & the Spirit's power, may we all be bold about God's gospel: it's revelation & life-transforming power; trust in God's word: as we teach the Scriptures to children; and engage the ever-changing culture: with the unchanging gospel, as we pray evangelistically, as we love our neighbors and our enemies, and as we think deeply about the gospel & proclaim the supremacy of Christ. until He returns in power & great glory. Hallelujah & Amen.