

RESPONDING TO THE GOSPEL

Sir Isaac Newton said that for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. This fundamental law of physics can be adapted to any situation and broadened in its scope to say that for every stimulus (action) there is a response (reaction). In dealing with people, we might say that we are affected to some extent by whatever we encounter. Every situation produces a decision or a choice. In most cases, what we see and hear produces a null response; that is, we choose to ignore what we saw and heard. Most of the time this response is made at a sub-conscience level; however, at times we have to take a more considered approach and weigh alternative responses. For example, if you were driving on the road and saw a dog running across a field, you would likely ignore that information. On the other hand, if you came upon a car with its hood raised along side the road and a woman and two children were looking at the engine compartment, you would consciously evaluate (considering the likely consequences) what your response should be. For example, if you stop and help, you may be late, if you ignore the situation, you will feel guilty, etc. Whatever you do is a response to the encounter or information input you experienced.

In these two cases, what made the difference in whether you dealt with the response on a sub-conscience or conscience level? The answer lies in the perceived consequences to you personally. The dog running across the field had no perceived impact on you. However, if you had recently lost a dog that looked like the one running across the field, then your response moves directly into the conscious realm. The difference in the two situations is simply “perceived personal consequences.”

There is nothing any more consequential to us personally than where and with whom we will spend eternity. The extent to which a person believes that truth will affect his response to the message of the gospel.

The Apostle Paul believed it was his responsibility to provide the stimulus regarding the question of eternal choices and consequences to everyone he met. Paul did not let his circumstances affect his responsibility. Even while unjustly imprisoned he would seize every opportunity to confront people with the claims of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

When Paul was imprisoned in Caesarea and appealed to Caesar, this caused a real problem for Festus. If Paul was going to appear before Caesar, then there must be something with which he was charged and Festus did not know what offence to say that Paul was charged with. When King Agrippa came to Caesarea for a visit, Festus set up a hearing before Agrippa to help determine what the charges against Paul should be. Paul was brought before this gathering and was given an opportunity to present his story. What he told them was essentially his personal testimony. It involved his life before he met Jesus, how he met Jesus and his life after his conversion.

Since Agrippa had a Jewish background he could understand the situation of Paul’s life prior to his conversion. Paul used this as a starting point and then moved to what happened on the road to Damascus.

“While thus occupied, as I journeyed to Damascus with authority and commission from the chief priests, at midday, O king, along the road I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, shining around me and those who journeyed with me. And when we all had fallen to the ground, I heard a voice speaking to me and saying in the Hebrew language, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.’ So I said, ‘Who are You, Lord?’ And He said, ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But rise and stand on your feet; for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to make you a minister and a witness both of the things which you have seen and of the things which I will yet reveal to you. I will deliver you from the Jewish people, as well as from the Gentiles, to whom I now send you, to open their eyes, in order to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who are sanctified by faith in Me.’” (Acts 26:12-18)

What was Paul called to do? What was his commission? To be a minister and witness of what he had seen and what Jesus would reveal to him.

Does this commission apply to all believers or was it just for Paul? Why?

Assuming the commission applies to all believers, then why do many not minister and witness? (Maybe they haven't seen anything and nothing has been revealed to them.)

Why is it important to minister and witness? (So people can have their eyes opened to the truth, so they can turn . . . , receive forgiveness and an inheritance.)

Paul was faithful to the call and commission of Jesus on his life. As he continued his testimony before the officials he was fulfilling part of what Jesus had told him about presenting the gospel before kings.

“Therefore, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, but declared first to those in Damascus and in Jerusalem, and throughout all the region of Judea, and then to the Gentiles, that they should repent, turn to God, and do works befitting repentance. For these reasons the Jews seized me in the temple and tried to kill me. Therefore, having obtained help from God, to this day I stand, witnessing both to small and great, saying no other things than those which the prophets and Moses said would come – that the Christ would suffer, that He would be the first to rise from the dead, and would proclaim light to the Jewish people and to the Gentiles.” (Acts 26:19-23)

Paul conveniently worked into his testimony God's universal plan of salvation. He used a word with which we are familiar, “repent.”

What does the word REPENT mean to you?

The next step in Paul's three step plan was “turn to God.” At first glance, we might think that “repent” would carry the idea of turning to God. However, we would presume that everyone has the same background and thinks as we do. The basic meaning of the Greek word is to simply change your mind and (by implication) direction in life. It is important that the new direction to which a person turns is the right one. There are many paths to which a person can turn, but only one leads to God. To turn to God is an act of faith. Other words for exercise of faith are “trust” and “believe.”

What does the word TRUST mean to you?

The third step in this plan that Paul shared with Agrippa and Festus is “do works befitting repentance.” In a word, we could say this means to obey.

What does the word OBEY mean to you? See also Eph 2:8-10.

If we are to be effective in ministering and witnessing to people, after we share our testimony (my life before Christ, how I met Jesus, my life after Christ) and present the basics of the plan of salvation, it is important to be sensitive to what is happening to those who are listening and look for opportunities to encourage them to make a decision. Paul did not have to wait to get a response from Festus.

Now as he thus made his defense, Festus said with a loud voice, "Paul, you are beside yourself! Much learning is driving you mad!" But he said, "I am not mad, most noble Festus, but speak the words of truth and reason.

A lesson we can learn by analyzing Paul's response to Festus is that we should never let someone provoke us to an ignoble exchange of insults. Paul was very much in control and addressed Festus with decorum and respect. Festus had previously shown his true nature by having exchanges with Paul in hopes of being bribed. Paul's target was Agrippa and he did not wish to jeopardize his credibility by calling Festus the fool he was.

“For the king, before whom I also speak freely, knows these things; for I am convinced that none of these things escapes his attention, since this thing was not done in a corner. King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you do believe. Acts 26:26-27)

Our witness is not complete until we have attempted to obtain a commitment from those who

hear the gospel message. Unless we do this step, then we are like to the salesman who presents his product but never asks you to buy. Such a salesman would be unproductive. Paul had done what he could and the rest was up to Agrippa.

Then Agrippa said to Paul, "You almost persuade me to become a Christian." And Paul said, "I would to God that not only you, but also all who hear me today, might become both almost and altogether such as I am, except for these chains." When he had said these things, the king stood up, as well as the governor and Bernice and those who sat with them; and when they had gone aside, they talked among themselves, saying, "This man is doing nothing deserving of death or chains." Then Agrippa said to Festus, "This man might have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar."

Agrippa was inclined to trust in Jesus. What Paul said made sense to him. However, he like so many people are only inclined to trust in Christ. They are "almost Christians."

What are some expected behaviors of "almost Christians?"

As the saying goes, "Close only counts in horse shoes." God calls us to give ourselves totally and completely to Him and accept Him as Lord of all. This was the hope and prayer that Paul had for those that heard him that day in Caesarea. It should be our hope and prayer for everyone that we know and we should be ready to give voice to our faith so that everyone we know will know Jesus also.

How do we view the outcome of this meeting and of all that had happened to Paul in the past several years? Was it tragic? Paul was innocent but he was still a prisoner. Was it unfair? Without knowing the "big picture" we cannot assess the situation. Since we know the "rest of the story" we know that all these things worked together to accomplish the plan God had to have the gospel message presented to Caesar himself.

As we encounter "difficulties" and "unfair" situations in life how do we react? Do we go about what God has called us to do regardless of the circumstances or do we use such things as an excuse to minister and to witness to others of the wonderful news of God's love in Jesus Christ? If we don't share it when everything is going well, then we will not be likely to share it when times are tough. When we see another person do we produce a "null response" and simply ignore them or do we see each person as someone for whom Christ died and see ourselves as the instrument (minister) of God's grace? What makes the difference in how we respond? Earlier we said that "perceived personal consequences" is the deciding factor. Will God require an accounting of how we used the opportunities He has given us to fulfill the commission given to everyone of us.