

CONSIDER THE METHODS Matthew 10:16

INTRODUCTION:

The great Quaker scholar and author, D. Elton Trueblood has said:
“Evangelism occurs when Christians are so ignited by their contact with Christ that they, in turn, set other fires. It is easy to determine when something is aflame. It ignites other material. Any fire that does not spread will eventually go out. A church without evangelism is a contradiction in terms, just as fire that does not burn is a contradiction.”

Isn't that a terrific quote? And absolutely true. I am quite confident that everyone here would agree with Trueblood's statement. And yet before we came through the doors of the auditorium this morning, we already knew that we needed to be setting others aflame with the love of Jesus. But still we don't do it. Or at least we don't do it very often and we don't do it very well.

Jesus never said it would be easy to evangelize the world. In fact, he told the twelve apostles: *“I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves.”*

Evangelism is not easy and there will be opposition to our work. But the work needs to be accomplished anyway. For the church to be the church that Jesus intended her to be, we must first be ignited by our contact with Christ and then, in turn, set other fires. To be effective, we must learn to burn in such a way that the fire stays alive and we do not burn out.

If we are to burn in such a way that we spread and do not burn out, Jesus said we must:

I. **Follow like a SHEEP**

Jesus said that he was sending out his twelve apostles like sheep among wolves. I want you to picture that image clearly in your mind and hold it there for a few moments: sheep in the midst of a pack of wolves.

We are using Max Lucado's book, *Traveling Light*, in our Wednesday evening Bible studies. *Traveling Light* is Lucado's look at the 23rd Psalm. In that book, Lucado points out that when the Bible compares us to sheep, it is not a particularly flattering analogy. Lucado contends that sheep are dirty, dumb and defenseless.

I don't have a lot of first-hand experience with sheep that would verify this but it makes sense. As Lucado says, you don't see sheep cleaning and preening the way a cat or a bird does. You don't see trained sheep performing at the circus or in obedience trials at the county fair. And they

are not much use at fighting. People have trained dogs to fight, roosters to fight and even fish to fight but you don't see a lot of fighting sheep. And even when a school picks a ram for a mascot, it is usually the male mountain goat that they picture, not the male sheep.

No, sheep are not exceptionally bright nor gifted animals. Yet, going back to the earliest days of Israel, God described His people as the sheep of His pasture. It was King David who wrote, "The LORD is my shepherd."

Why, with their nature, do you suppose God chose sheep as the picture for His people? It is precisely *because* of the nature of sheep.

- Sheep are **docile** animals. They are quiet, meek, submissive, and obedient. That is exactly what God desires of His people: that they be trusting and compliant instead of stiff-necked and disobedient.
- Sheep are **defenseless** animals. I've already spoken to this but let me just reiterate that sheep are largely defenseless beasts. They cannot even run fast enough to escape most predators.
- Because sheep are docile and defenseless, they are **dependent** animals. They need to be led to green pastures and still waters. They need to be protected from their enemies. They need a shepherd. But for the shepherd to be of any benefit to them, they need to follow him.

Isaiah 53:6 says, "All we like, sheep, have gone astray." Luke 15 tells about a sheep that was lost from a shepherd's flock and a good shepherd who left the other 99 and went searching for the lost sheep until he found it. Only in a nursery rhyme would someone be so naïve as to believe that when a sheep is lost, if you "leave him alone, he'll come home, wagging his tail behind him." (As if there would have been any other place he could have been wagging his tail other than behind him!)

The point is that sheep need to be led if they are going to be secure in the open country and for them to be led safely, they must follow their shepherd closely.

Jesus wanted his disciples to understand that for them to be effective evangelists in a hostile environment, they must follow like sheep.

II. Think like a SERPENT

But they must also think like serpents. He said his disciples were to be as shrewd as snakes. The older King James Version of the Bible said they were to be as wise as serpents.

Genesis 3 opens with these words:

Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made. (NIV)

The New Living Translation of Genesis says the serpent was “the shrewdest” of all the wild animals. But I especially like the way the King James Version put it. That translation says the serpent was “more subtle” than any other beast of the field.

It is difficult to hold up serpents as role models or as illustrations of positive characteristics for Christians. Going all the way back to Eden, the serpent has been presented as a loathsome and detestable creature. In fact, after the sin of Adam and Eve, God said to the serpent:

*“Because you have done this,
 “Cursed are you above all the livestock
 and all the wild animals!
 You will crawl on your belly
 and you will eat dust
 all the days of your life.
¹⁵ And I will put enmity
 between you and the woman,
 and between your offspring and hers;
 he will crush your head,
 and you will strike his heel.”*

It is a crazy thing but it is true that there is “enmity” between the offspring of the serpent and the offspring of women. Very few people are born with a natural affinity for snakes.

I saw in the *Advocate-Press* that there is to be a snake handler at this year’s Appleknocker Festival next month. Serengeti Steve Forney bills himself as “The Reptile Man.”

What do you think he’s going to do with snakes at the Appleknocker Festival? Do you suppose he’ll have them jumping through hoops? Slithering in formation? No. I’m sure about all he’ll do is handle the snakes. He’ll lift them up, drape them over his shoulders, drape them over other people’s shoulders and then put them back in their boxes. That’s about it, I suspect.

Well then why will people come watch him simply handle snakes? Because it is unnatural. Most people won’t touch them...except for adolescent boys that are trying to show off to adolescent girls. Why is it that most people do not feel the same warmth for a snake that they do for a puppy? Might it go back to a garden long ago and far away?

That’s why I say it is difficult to hold up serpents as role models or as illustrations of positive characteristics for Christians. The serpent has been used to depict Satan in the Bible. But here, Jesus is pointing out a virtue of the serpent: its wisdom.

Genesis 3 opened by telling us how clever the serpent was, how shrewd and how wise. And it is true. Think of the way snakes behave.

- Snakes are very **astute** creatures. They are always aware of their surroundings and very focused on their prey.
- Snakes are **active** reptiles. They do not wait for their prey to come to them, they go out after it.
- Serpents are **artful** animals. That is, they are clever enough to blend in with their surroundings and slip up on their target. You don't hear snakes roar, bark or growl. They are much too unobtrusive and inconspicuous for that.
- Serpents are typically very **adaptable** in that they adjust to the lighting, to the climate and to the surroundings so they can do their job effectively and efficiently.
- And snakes are very **alert**. They seem always aware of what is going on around them. In fact, did you realize, that snakes do not have eyelids and cannot close their eyes? No wonder they are so alert.

Now, when Jesus advised Christians to "be shrewd as serpents and innocent as doves" he was not telling us to imitate the venomous nature of the poisonous snakes. He was telling us to be as clever and subtle as the serpent so we can get the healing power of the Gospel to people who desperately need it.

III. Encourage like a DOVE

Jesus told the twelve to be not only as wise as serpents but also as harmless as doves. When he said that, I suspect that the reference to doves might have reminded the apostles of the story of Noah and the ark. In that incident, when Noah sent out a dove from the ark, the dove flew over the earth and eventually flew back with an olive branch in its beak. That was an encouragement to Noah and his family because the water level had gone down and olive trees were appearing above the surface. Later, when a dove was released and it did not return, that was an encouragement to Noah and his family that the water had receded to the point where the dove could live on the earth and no longer needed to live on the ark.

If the disciples of Jesus are to be effective evangelists and incendiary Christians, they must be as wise as serpents and as encouraging as doves.

Do those two images seem contradictory? They do not have to be.

Jesus was setting up a dichotomy of two, seemingly incongruous yet complimentary elements. Let me illustrate what I mean. I remember the first time I saw sweet and sour pork on the menu of a Chinese restaurant.

I didn't think that a dish could be both sweet and sour at the same time. And if it could, I didn't think it would taste good. But I found out it can and it does.

Let me give you another example. We went to Champaign Friday to visit our newest granddaughter, Sommer. I saw something that is almost unbelievable. Sommer is pretty. And not just your average pretty, she is exceptionally pretty. Yet she looks a lot like her Daddy.

Pretty and Lamark are incongruous: they don't seem to go together. Yet there they are in one wonderful baby. Can serpents and doves possibly fit together? Can wisdom and harmlessness fit in the same person?

Jesus was saying that those who bring the good news of salvation ought to be as wise and as creative as was the serpent in the garden who brought temptation and condemnation. And, a little like the ancient medical oath, we are first of all to do no harm to those we seek to help.

Jesus' statement about being wise as serpents and harmless as doves could almost be summed up as Paul phrased it in Romans 16:19 "I want you to be wise about what is good, and innocent about what is evil" (NIV).

CONCLUSION:

To be effective evangelists and combustible Christians, we need to follow like sheep and to be both wise like serpents and harmless like doves. Unfortunately, instead of following like sheep, we are often as wayward as feral cats. Instead of being wise as serpents and harmless as doves, Christians are often bird-brained and mean as snakes. I've watched and heard Christians who seemed to get some perverse pleasure out of telling people they were going to hell. I've seen and heard tactless Christians tell grieving families that their deceased loved ones would never make it to heaven. I've seen and heard Christians be most harsh and unloving when confronting the sin in the life of a brother or a sister.

If we are to be as wise as serpents and as harmless as doves, we will be tactful, loving, kind and Christlike.

The fire of evangelism will never spread until we learn to follow like sheep, think like serpents and encourage like doves.

INVITATION: #112 (in the older hymnal) – *"Pass It On"*