

Confirming the Word

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Introduction.

It's just common sense that whenever we begin a project, we consider the tools that we have and think about how we can best use those tools to accomplish our goal. In my recent work on building a built-in bookcase for our downstairs, I would really have liked to have had a radial saw to do my crosscuts. Sadly, though, I don't own a radial saw, and I'm not about to buy one. As a result, I had to turn my attention to the tools that I do have. I do own a table saw, and that's what I used. Even though the results were not as precise as I would have preferred, it got the job done.

Likewise, in the realm of evangelism, we need to consider what tools we do and don't have to save the lost. We're in competition with religious groups and other groups all over this city, and we only succeed when we persuade souls to listen to our truth instead of somebody else's lie. That means that we need something that will make us stand out, that will help us win those battles. There are many advantages that we DON'T have. We're not going to outnumber everybody else. We're not going to outspend everybody else. We're not going to out-organize everybody else.

And you know what? That's OK. God didn't design the Lord's church to be the most numerous, the wealthiest, or the most organized. Those things are not our strength, and we should not be relying on them. Instead, we ought to use the things that we do have and that the word says SHOULD be our strength. We're never going to stand out because of our numbers or our wealth. However, we should be standing out because of our righteousness and our love. The key to evangelism for us is ordinary Christians getting out there and being better disciples of Jesus than anyone else, so that people who love Jesus will love us. We should be using our lives as a tool for confirming the word.

Then and Now.

Let's explore this idea by considering it in a Biblical context, what it meant to confirm the word then, and what it means for us to confirm the word now. This phrase actually comes from the last verse of the book of Mark, Mark 16:20. Here's why this was necessary: Whether we realize it or not, the first century was an extremely chaotic time religiously. The Roman Empire had brought peoples all across the Mediterranean together under one government for the first time, and every one of those tribes and nations came with its own set of gods. They all competed for worshipers just like different religions do today, so early Christianity had to contend with Zeus and Artemis and hundreds and hundreds of other deities besides. In such a confusing religious mish-mash, the apostles and other evangelists needed something that would help them stand out. What they got was the power from God to work signs to confirm their message. Anybody could claim to be from God, but only a true prophet could heal or raise the dead. That's why spiritual gifts existed in the first place—so that Christians could show up in a strange town and prove in minutes that they were from God.

Interestingly enough, even though Mark calls this “confirming” the word, the actual order of events was usually the other way around. The man of God would do some spectacular supernatural thing that left no doubt that God was with him, and then, once he'd gathered a crowd that was awestruck by the miracle he'd performed, THEN he'd start telling them about Jesus. We see a classic example of this in Acts 3:6-7. Here, we see Peter healing a lame man who had been begging at the gate of the temple since birth. This guy isn't a ringer whom Peter has brought in. Everybody who worships at the temple knows this guy can't walk, and so, when they see him walking, they know God is responsible.

We see their reaction, as well as Peter's reaction to them, in Acts 3:11-12. Just like we would be, they come to stand around and marvel at this miracle that has occurred. Peter knows that the crowd of gawkers is a ready-made sermon audience, so he preaches Jesus to them. Peter has no need to establish that he's truly from God, because the miracle has already done that for him. He's able to preach the gospel to an audience that is guaranteed to listen.

Obviously, we can't confirm the word like Peter and the prophets did. We can't heal Ted Kennedy as he's dying from cancer or call rain out of a blue sky to end a drought. However, we still need to do something. The religious world today is just as much a mishmash as it was 2000 years ago. When all these various denominations and sects and cults are crying out for attention, we need to do something unique that will make our voice stand out from the crowd. We see what our unique tool should be in Matthew 5:16. Of course, the idea of letting our light shine is not a new one. In fact, it may have been the most important method of confirming the word in the first century too. There's no evidence that ordinary, rank-and-file Christians all had miraculous spiritual gifts. The signs of the apostles were spectacular, but not common. Instead, common disciples reached their neighbors by displaying their love and their devotion to Christ.

We can't work miracles today, but we can do that. Indeed, we must do that. We're not called to blend in with the world. We don't treat others only as well as anybody would treat them. Instead, if we are truly disciples of Jesus, we will act like Jesus. We will live lives of love and service that show everyone that God is truly at work within us, and then, once we have shown others our love in a way that reaches their hearts, then we can tell them about our Savior.

Ways to Confirm.

That's the general theory, but what does that mean in practice? What are some ways we have to confirm the word, to show the skeptical people around us that Jesus is truly within us? This is not the sort of thing that we can compile an exhaustive, authoritative list of, but confirming the word in this way begins with **HONORING EVERYONE**. Peter exhorts us to do this in 1 Peter 2:16-17. This means that we need to treat everyone we encounter with courtesy and respect, to be friendly and helpful to them, to submit our needs to theirs. Of course, the world doesn't act like this. The Joliet area is filled with people who are rude and hostile, who constantly insist that everyone else defer to them. Peter's point is that God has freed us from that. Because of the grace of God that fills our lives, we are a blessed people. God has already put a value on us by sending His Son to die for us, so we no longer need to demand respect from anyone else. However, God didn't give us these things so we can strut around with our noses in the air. Instead, we have been freed for service. Because of what God has given us, we can be more respectful, we can be more patient, we can be more humble than anyone else. We don't need honor from others, so we are free to honor them instead. We should treat everyone in our lives, from the CEO to the janitor, with dignity and kindness that shows their value to us.

As part of this, we should confirm the word by using **GRACIOUS SPEECH**. Paul highlights the importance of speech like this in Ephesians 4:29. This is a Biblical rule that needs to govern what we say every time we open our mouths. We should never be people who engage in corrupt, unwholesome speech, which could be anything from a dirty joke to gossip about a co-worker. Instead, everything we say needs to build others up and bring favor and blessing into their lives. I have to tell you, brethren—this is a hard one to live up to, but there is no doubt that if we succeed in governing our speech in this way, it WILL make us stand out. How many times every day do we encounter people who don't bless us with their speech? Some speak harshly and angrily; others use foul language; still others speak to everyone with disinterest and indifference. We need to rise above that. We need to use every word we say as a vehicle to convey our care and concern for others. In practice, here's the way we need to think. Whenever we begin a conversation, before we open our mouths, we have to ask, "How can I use this conversation to make the other guy's life better?"

The natural counterpart to gracious speech is **GOOD WORKS**. These are highlighted, among many other places, in 1 Peter 2:12. However, many Christians are confused about what counts as a good work here. They say, "Others see my good works because I go to church three times a week and don't cuss." Now, I'm not saying that we shouldn't go to church and avoid foul language, but that's not really the kind of behavior that's under consideration here. Instead, if we want to use our good works to bring others to Christ, they have to be the kind of good works that **THEY** count as good works. We have to do the things that impress sinners as being loving and righteous. They aren't going to care that we show up for services every time the doors are opened, but they are going to care if we show up to help them move into their new house. They aren't going to care that we know the Bible forward and backward, but they are going to care when we offer to give them a ride to the mechanic when their car's in the shop. In short, the things that most strike sinners as good works are the times when we invest time and effort in helping them. That's what we need to do.

A subset of good works that's particularly important is showing **HOSPITALITY**. We see the Scriptural importance of being hospitable set out in Hebrews 13:2. This is all the more important because our culture is not hospitable. Most people go for years without ever having anyone outside members of their family in their homes. They find their friends on TV instead. When most people are so unwelcoming, hospitality is a powerful, powerful display of love. It's almost a rule of mine these days that before I'll study the Bible with someone, I want to have them over for dinner first. This accomplishes several crucial goals. First, it gives us another chance to let our light shine, to show them by our conversation that we value them and want the best for them. Second, it helps us get to know them so we can figure out what evangelistic approach to take. Third, it really, really sets us apart from everybody else. When we have others in our homes, they remember it and take it to heart more than you would believe. I have quite literally had people I was studying with say to me, "When you invited me to your house and fed me dinner, even though you didn't know me, that showed me that you were a good person and that you cared about me." Brethren, if a seeker believes that I'm a good person and care about him, and I get to study with him, he's nearly certain to obey the gospel. Hospitality is one of the most powerful weapons in our spiritual arsenal. We need to use it to show others that we love them.

Finally, we stand out by **RETURNING GOOD FOR EVIL**. Peter explains in 1 Peter 3:9. In the world, it's just expected that when somebody does you a bad turn, they end up on your enemies list, and you wait for your chance to do them a bad turn. When we don't play by the rules, that makes us stand out. When we instead look for opportunities to bless those who have wronged us, we make it clear that we're motivated by something greater than selfishness, and both the people we bless and those who see it will remember our behavior. This is hard, but it's worth it.

Now, though, just like we had a homework assignment last week, we have another one this week. Remember those three people each of us identified as prospects for the gospel? Starting now, and continuing indefinitely, let's each of us do our best to confirm the word to them before we even speak it. Let's take every opportunity we have to love them, bless them, and make their lives better, so that they will be fertile soil for the seed when we sow it.