

How Do You Respond?

Luke 2:8-18

Several years ago I heard about a radio program that consisted of nothing but good news. Sadly, the program had to be taken off the air after only six weeks because no one listened to it! We humans do not seem to be interested in hearing good news unless it affects us directly. We are only mildly interested when we hear that a neighbor has struck oil on his property, but if we discover oil on our property, well, that's good news!

How do you respond when someone tells you good news? Your response probably depends on what the good news is, and how it will affect your life.

The shepherds on that Judean hillside long ago had heard reports of men who had claimed to be the Jewish Messiah. There was *Theudas*, who “boasted himself to be somebody,” and had a following of about 400 men. And there was *Judas the Galilean*, who came into prominence about the time Jesus was born. This was not the same Judas who betrayed Jesus later. These shepherds had most likely heard the claims of these men and they were only mildly interested. Men like Theudas and Judas the Galilean had come and gone, and never had they asked for the help or cooperation of any of these shepherds.

But now suddenly they were the recipients of Good News good for *them* because they were directly involved good for *us* because we, too, are directly involved!

What the angel of the Lord actually said to them was “*Fear not: for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be for all the people*” (Luke 2:10). That last phrase “*for all the people*” is where you and I come in; that's how we are affected.

The shepherds, whose names we do not know, responded to the announcement of the angel, but *how* they responded to this good news shows us that we should respond in a positive way to this Good News of Great Joy which we Christians repeat every year at this time.

1 Our first response to this Good News: believe it, v. 15

Consider the first reaction the shepherds had when the angels had finished delivering their Good News that unforgettable night. They *believed* the

report of the angels. This wasn't a time to argue among themselves, or to question what the angels had said, or even to try to understand what the angels had said. The Bible doesn't say in verse fifteen, "And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us now sit down here with a sane mind and explain away this which we think we have seen." Not at all!

They did not even say to each other, "Let us go see *if* this is true." No! What they said is recorded for us in verse fifteen, "Let us go and see this thing which has come to pass." Their response was one of belief.

Why? The key to their belief is clearly seen in the last phrase of the verse. The shepherds acknowledged that the message they had received was from the Lord! They said, "Let us go to Bethlehem and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us." They gave the Lord God of Israel the credit for the message they had received, and the natural result was that they believed.

One important, basic response we should have to this "Good News of Great Joy" is to believe it! Simply believe it! Now, to believe something doesn't mean that we have to understand it. I don't understand how God could become a man, but I believe it. I don't understand how Jesus could be born of a virgin, but I believe it. I respond to this Good News by simply believing it! That's called "faith," and it was the same faith that enabled me to trust Jesus for my salvation.

In the realm of faith, there are no "ifs." "If God does such and such, I'd believe in Him." "If I could understand it, I'd believe it." A faith like that is so negative as not to be a faith at all! And our responding faith in Christ should be positive. The basis for our faith is the acknowledgment that the news is from the Lord. Even the faith itself is a gift from God. Listen to Ephesians 2:8: "For by grace are you saved through faith; and even faith is not of yourselves, but is a gift of God." Our first response should be to believe it.

2 Our second response to this Good News: obey it, vv. 15-16

In verse eleven, we read that the angel of the Lord had told the shepherds that the Christ Child could be found in the City of David, which was Bethlehem. And then in verses 15-16, we read that the shepherds went to Bethlehem. Their belief in the Good News was backed up by their obedience. The Bible does not say that the angel of the Lord explicitly told them to go; their duty and their next course of action was plain to them. So they obeyed and went. And

verse sixteen tells us that this message was so important to the shepherds that they “hurried off,” that they obeyed “with haste.”

One of the basic truths of this life in Christ, which is hardest to grasp, is that obedience is a direct, uncontrollable result of belief. It will come as naturally as water in a puddle begins to freeze when the temperature drops below 32 degrees. Obedience will follow belief as surely as a green plant will respond to the rays of the sun. Belief which does not result in obedience cannot in reality be said to be belief at all. And our true belief in this Good News of Great Joy will most assuredly give way to immediate and continuous and obedient action.

We will obey when we realize what our duty is as children of God, whatever that duty may be. When you know that your duty as a Christian, for instance, is to love others, then the result of that belief is that you love others. When we truly believe that God commands us to pray, then the result of that belief is that we pray. We will obey also when we realize the importance of what we believe. The shepherds considered what they had heard to be important. And like the shepherds we should obey with haste!

When David, fleeing from Saul, came to Ahimelech the priest, he asked Ahimelech to give him a sword. David told a little story, saying that the king had sent him on special, secret business, and David had left in such a hurry that he had had no time to strap on his own weapon. He said, “*The king’s business required haste*” (1 Samuel 21:1-8).

We find that even today, on this side of the Cross, that the King’s business requires haste. We are so quick to gossip and quarrel and fight with each other. We are so quick to have our own way and to seek our own pleasures and to trust in our own power. Why are we not as quick to do the business of the King with haste?

When the King had risen triumphantly from the dead that first Easter morning, another angel was there to announce Good News of Great Joy! Jesus had risen! On the basis of that belief, the women who had come to the tomb that morning were to obey with haste. The King’s business required haste! The angel said to the women, “*Go quickly, and tell his disciples that he is risen from the dead....*” And the next verse says, “*So the women hurried away from the tomb...*” (Matthew 28:7-8)

They realized! and we must realize it, too! that the King’s business requires haste! Let us respond to the Good News of Great Joy with obedience.

3 A third response to this Good News: tell it, vv. 17-18

We see in verses 17-18 the natural, logical result of the experience these shepherds shared together. *“And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child. And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds.”*

Notice something very important here. There is no time wasted between verses 16 and 17. When the shepherds saw the Christ Child, they began to share with others this Good News of Great Joy. Only when they had personally experienced this Good News could they be faithful witnesses of the Great Joy.

But these shepherds were faithful witnesses. They told exactly what they had heard, and exactly what they had seen. That’s all that was expected of them. That’s all they could do. Once they had seen the Christ Child they could hardly talk of anything else.

Perhaps the major reason why there are not more people witnessing for Christ is that not as many people have truly experienced Christ as we tend to think. You can’t be a witness to something if you’ve never experienced it. But those of us who do believe and those who do obey – we are the ones commanded to be faithful witnesses.

Well, what are we to say? We are to tell what we’ve seen and heard in our life experiences as Christians – not only what Christ has done for us in the past or will do in the future, but especially what Christ is doing right now in the present. We should respond to this Good News of Great Joy by making the News known to others.

Now I’ve got a story to tell you, but first, we’re going to dismiss all our children into the choir room for just a few minutes until the service is over.

* * * * *

Don Bakely once pastored a church in urban Camden, New Jersey, once named the nation’s most dangerous city. Bakely was especially concerned about a fellow named “Big Mart.” One day Bakely was sitting in his church office, when he heard a commotion outside – profanity, shouting, a loud argument. It was between Ella, the church secretary, and Big Mart, and he was calling her a vile and obscene name. Before Bakely could respond, Ella came storming into his office.

She said, “Did you hear what that young man called me out there?” When he replied that he had, Ella asked, “Well, what are you going to do about it?” Bakely

said, "That's a good question, Ella—a really good question. But the real question is what are *you* going to do about it?"

She hadn't expected that kind of answer, but she regrouped and with some exasperation she said, "I guess I want you to go out there and throw him out." But the pastor replied, "Ella, I've been working for six weeks to get him in here. You want me to throw him out on the first day? . . . Ella, let me tell you a story; it's a true story; then I want you to go home and think about it. " "

"When Big Mart was a little boy, his dad came home one night in a rage and began to beat up Big Mart's mother. He became so furious and so violent that he brought the children into the room, closed the door and forced them to watch while he killed her. He then took a paring knife and cut her head off in front of those children. When Big Mart could not stand it anymore he broke for the door and got out, but when he reached the top of the stairs, his father threw his mother's head and hit him in the back, pitching him down the entire flight to the landing. It knocked him out, but when he woke up on the landing, he was lying on his mother's head. That's Big Mart. He's the guy you met out there, the guy who uh—uh—called you that name."

Ella didn't say a word. She just turned and walked out the door, but she was back in twenty minutes. She walked over to the pastor's desk and just looked at him. The pastor said, "Well?" And she said, "I guess I am going to have to learn how to get cussed out." The pastor said later that the ministry of that church began then and there. (*Hard Living People and Mainstream Christians*, Tex Sample)

Now I apologize if that story offends our Sunday morning sensibilities. Are there any "Big Mart's" around here? How do we relate to them? Or other people with a past? Do you have a burden deep in your soul for them? Have you learned how to get cussed out without losing sight of the Commission of Christ? Sharon made this remark to me the other night: "If we want to reach people for Christ, we can't let either their past or our perceptions of them define them." It means that their history no longer matters. That means that anything they may have done in their past is no longer relevant. It means that we see a soul that can be washed clean in the Blood of Jesus Christ, their sins paid for and removed from them as far as the east is from the west.

Vance Havner was a Southern Baptist evangelist who lived during the 20th century. He wrote a book in 1945 in which he described a stroll he took one day in a cemetery: "Did anybody tell them of Jesus? Did they move, day in and day out,

among Christians who never let them find it out? In a land of churches, did they spend their years as a tale that is told and never have one Christian invite them to go along with him to the land that is fairer than day? If graves could speak, how they could embarrass us in our fine churches some Sunday morning if all these lost souls, forever past redemption, could file into our sanctuaries and, pointing fingers of eternal scorn, remind us, 'For years I walked your streets, worked beside you, did business with you, lived among you, and never did you warn me of my impending doom nor point me to your Savior!' " (Vance Havner, in *Pleasant Paths*, published by Revell in 1945)

Wouldn't that shake up a few well-organized orders of worship!

I have a dream, and it has two parts. The first part of my dream is to one day pastor a church where the members are actually walking the aisles during the invitations, bringing lost people with them to be saved—people they've been burdened for and praying for and witnessing to. That's the first part of my dream. The second part of my dream is that it will be this church where that happens.

You see, this Good News of Great Joy is not just for church people. It's not just for good people. And it's certainly not just for Christians. Read it again if you need to: *"I bring you good news of great joy that will be for **all** the people."* Rich people. Poor people. People who struggle to make ends meet. People with serious health issues. People who are healthy and strong. Single. Divorced. Married. Widowed. Educated. Uneducated. Conservative. Liberal. Young. Old. Those not white. White. Beautiful and handsome. Ugly. People with their lives all put together just so, and those who get through a single day only with great effort. *"I bring you good news of great joy that will be for **all** the people."*

Yes, this Good News of Great Joy deserves a response from those of us who hear and know what It means. From the story of how the shepherds responded, we learn that we should believe it, we should obey it, and we should tell it. If you're not telling it, you're not obeying it. And if you're not obeying it, you really don't believe it.

How do **YOU** respond?