

Sermon Series: Proclaiming Christ Today

The B.E.L.L.S. model 1 Thessalonians 2:1-12

Intro

How do you react when you hear church bells ringing today?

Recently, when travelling in Europe, I found it quaint and calming to hear the church bells ring at different hours of the day across the towns. Yet our experience here in North Carlton just a few years ago was a barrage of complaint from neighbours about this disturbance our church bell caused of a Sunday. Naturally we ceased the practice immediately.



There's a lesson in that for us about the relationship of the Church to the general community in our time and place. In times past, church bells called the faithful from the majority of households to gather on Sunday, and reminded them throughout the week of the importance of living for God's glory. Some churches today might like to simply **keep calm and carry on the bell ringing**. Yet, a new approach to bells is needed if we are to proclaim Christ in our communities effectively.

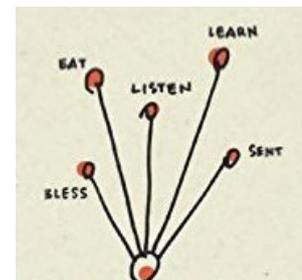


Australian author Michael Frost¹ (adapting the ideas of his friend Alan Hirsch) suggests that the Church should change its orientation and understanding of the power of church bells: not literally ringing out from towers to call people in, but being symbolic of Christians going out into the world with grace and love like soundwaves emanating from our gatherings.

B.E.L.L.S. stands for **Bless, Eat, Listen, Learn and Sent**.

Each element is defined as follows:

1. **Bless** A Hebrew word for "blessing" is *barak* and means "to empower to strength". This often takes the form of acts of kindness, words of affirmation, and unconditional generosity



¹ *Surprise the world: The five habits of highly missional people*, Navpress USA, 2016

2. **Eat** Sharing food at tables with others has been an important means of grace since ancient oriental times. It is a prominent feature of the growing church in New Testament times. Frost even contends that we need to put communion and worship back in the home.
3. **Listen** When Christians listen to God in prayer and reflection upon the Scriptures, the Spirit guides them. Many daily opportunities for serving and witnessing to Jesus can arise when we “listen” to God. When we listen actively to God, we may also become more receptive listeners to our neighbors.
4. **Learn** When Christians learn about the life and teaching of Jesus for themselves it transforms their goals, ethics, aspirations, decisions about who to love, and responses to suffering and disappointment. For many Christians, what they know about the Jesus of the bible comes from a recent sermon or a book read long ago. It’s vital that all Christians do their own personal work to **know about him** and **know** God through him. If someone asks us about our reasons for doing what we do, we will better know how to respond if we have our own enthusiasm about Jesus and knowledge of his saving grace.
5. **Sent** Seeing ourselves as **sent** takes a bit of re-thinking and action. We must consider our ordinary lives as part of God’s kingdom work in the world. This changes our view of mission. It gives us an understanding that our daily lives are meaningful and purposeful to God. We are all partners in making Jesus known in word and deed.

Are you an evangelist?

With good intentions, many preachers have told us in the past we should all be evangelists. Yet, for many of us “evangelist” conjures an unattractive caricature. Others feel neither equipped nor personally called to proclaim the Gospel to the public.



It’s helpful to know that in the New Testament teaching we see at least **two types of evangelism**:

1. **Commissioned, gifted evangelists** - those commissioned to clearly and boldly proclaim to the public far and wide, and
2. **Evangelistic believers** - those who through their intentional, ordinary love and kindness bear witness to Jesus in their locale.

Clearly, the Apostle Paul considered himself to be a **type 1** evangelist, as is clear in *Colossians* chapter 4 where Paul writes:

“...pray for us too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim... Christ... proclaim (him) clearly.” *Col. 4:3,4*

But note in the very next sentence how Paul thinks differently about the majority in the congregation he writes to. He encourages his readers to be **type 2** evangelists, saying:

“Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you many know how to answer everyone.” *Col. 4:5,6*

Paul doesn't seem to expect the average Colossian Christian to preach publicly. Instead, he calls them to **wise socialization** and **gracious responses to the questions** people present.

While some in the New Testament times were clearly commissioned to do the type 1 evangelism, most Christians in the New Testament references about promoting the Gospel are encouraged to live what Frost calls: **Questionable Lives** - that is, lives that are **open to question**. The Apostle Peter had this in mind in *1 Peter 3*, saying:

“Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience...” *1 Peter 3:15,16*

In the 4th Century Roman emperor Julian considered Christianity a “sickness” needing a cure! Even in earlier circumstances of Christian worship, the impact of following Jesus in many cities threatened the establishment and the status quo. Christian acts of **hospitality** and **philanthropy** won too many of Julian's subjects to Jesus for his liking in the 4th Century. He made a decree and set out to **out-do the Christians** by creating a system of food distribution and hostels for the poorest travellers in the empire. He did this out of political spite

because he saw how consistently Christians **cared not only for *their* poor, but for his.**

In 21st Century Melbourne, although society's foundations and ethics still bear the influence of Christian beliefs, it's often hard to distinguish who are followers of Jesus and who are not; quite a contrast to early Church beginnings. Yet, no-one in our world is unmoved by costly generosity; no-one is unsurprised by forgiveness of enemies; no-one is ungrateful for lavish hospitality; and no-one is neutral in opinion about those who work for justice. In other words, Christians, like anyone who act sacrificially in the name of Jesus may raise questions from observers – Why do you think like this? Why do you act like this? What motivates your choices?

Even Paul practiced type 2 evangelism himself. In *1 Thessalonians* chapter 2 we read:

“Just as a nursing mother cares for her children, so we cared for you. Because we loved you **so** much, we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but **our lives as well**. Surely you remember, brothers and sisters, our toil and hardship; we worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone while we preached the gospel of God to you. You are witnesses, and so is God, of how holy, righteous and blameless we were among you who believed. For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory.

Note the characteristics of type 2 evangelism:

- Paul **lived and worked** among them and was **open to question**.
- He was **generous and extracted no payment from them** (unlike other travelling preachers and rabbis of his time)
- He **loved others** with a love like God's love.

From these foundations Paul was able to share with strangers the good news about Jesus.

B.E.L.L.S.

We are unlikely to call many to join us by ringing the old church bells across rooftops in Melbourne today. I recommend that we let the sunset on the bells of the past for now. Ringing the **old bells** might **only evoke the question** “why the heck are you waking me up so early on a Sunday!”



But the B.E.L.L.S. of **blessing, eating, listening, learning, and being sent**, will be effective.



By “ringing” the **new B.E.L.L.S.** we might raise many fruitful enquiries, like:

- What makes you so concerned for **justice** for the poor, the indigenous, the foreigner?
- Why motivates your **generosity** to others?
- Why **don't you seek revenge** for the one who did you wrong?

We may not all be type 1 evangelists, but we can all consider ourselves as ones who are **sent**. C.S. Lewis once wrote,

“... the church exists for nothing else but to draw people into Christ... if they are not doing that, all the cathedrals, clergy, missions, sermons, even the Bible itself, are simply a waste of time. God became human for no other purpose.” *Mere Christianity* p171

Lent Challenge

During the Church's season of Lent in 2018 we at St Michael's are taking up the B.E.L.L.S. model as a spiritual exercise or challenge. During the 40 days leading to Easter, let's adopt the practice of **blessing, eating, listening, learning, and being sent** in very tangible and measurable ways to help us to grow in our witness to Jesus in our city.

See the Lent Challenge details on our website at www.stmichaelsnc.org.au for more information, and my God bless us as we take up the challenge.

Steve Webster 2017