

Losing Yourself for the Sake of the Gospel: Witness in the Early Church and Implications for Evangelism in Spain Today

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Published in *Global Missiology*, www.globalmissiology.org, October 2021

Abstract

This article analyzes Jesus's call to self-denial for the sake of the gospel in Mark 8:34-38 as a potential paradigm for witness in Spain and other post-Christian societies. The article traces the theme of self-surrender/self-denial throughout the biblical narrative, showing that it is a necessary part of repentance and turning toward God in faith. Examples of how the early believers embraced this call provide implications for evangelism among Spaniards and other secular societies today. The author has served with the Assemblies of God World Missions in Spain since 2008 and is a PhD candidate at Assemblies of God Theological Seminary.

Key Words: Christian ethics, Early Church, Europe, evangelism, Secularism, self-denial, Spain, witness

Introduction

“Jesus is fine, as long as he doesn't interfere with your freedom.” “You're the only practicing Christian I've ever met.” As a church planter in Andalusia, Spain, I hear statements like these regularly; the phrases exemplify the worldview and experiences of men and women in post-Christian, southern Europe. While being very familiar with the idea of Christianity, individuals lack contact with real believers and suspect that fervent religious commitment might inhibit their personal freedoms. After centuries of Roman Catholicism and decades of evangelism by Protestant missionaries, Spain remains challenging for those involved in Christian proclamation and church planting (Escobar 2014, 194). According to the Joshua Project, only 1.6% of people in Spain, from any background, report evangelical-type belief in Jesus as Savior (Joshua Project 2021). Long-term pastors see individual breakthroughs but acknowledge that Spain's small evangelical networks have had little or no impact on the broader society (Protestante Digital 2021).

In a land filled with church buildings, public crosses, and pilgrimage sites, men and women in Spain still need a “genuinely missionary encounter” with the gospel, as missionary Lesslie Newbigin declared decades ago upon returning to Europe (Newbigin 1986, 1). Those who bear the gospel in Spain face the question of what this genuine encounter should look like among people cynical about historic religion, especially Christianity, and committed to the ideals of pluralism and the pursuit of self-actualization. However, the gospel has faced daunting obstacles before, and the New Testament and early church narratives document the extraordinary growth of the Church in a hostile, pluralistic environment. Modern believers can learn from their example about the ways in which ordinary Spirit-transformed Christians who answer Christ's call to “lose themselves” can impact the world.

Mark 8:35-38 in Biblical Theology

And calling the crowd to him with his disciples, he said to them, “If anyone would come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? For what can

a man give in return for his soul? For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels” (ESV).

The fact that all four Gospel writers report these words reflects their centrality in the message and ministry of Jesus (Matthew 10:39, Luke 17:33, John 12:25). While modern readers may gloss over Jesus’s words as hyperbole, Ben Witherington III points out that Jesus directed His call of radical self-denial to both the crowd and the disciples—to everyone, not a select, elite leadership core (Witherington 2001, 244). To “come after” Jesus, men and women must deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow Him. Jesus’s call to “lose one’s life” for his sake and the sake of the gospel is nothing less, Witherington says, than “a walk on the wild side” (Witherington 2001, 244), a willingness to turn every aspect of life over to him without conditions, and even, if necessary, to die physically for his sake. Rather than hyperbole, Jesus walked this path and presented it as the reality of discipleship.

In the verses just before this passage, Peter objects to Jesus’s saying that the Son of Man must suffer and be killed; Jesus then fiercely rebukes him for choosing “the things of man” rather than the way of God (Mark 8:31-38). As Darrell Bock notes, the self-sacrifice of their Messiah went against everything the disciples hoped for: “What was an expectation of a deliverance by power would be accomplished in another way, by suffering and sacrifice” (Bock 2015, 244). Jesus was teaching His disciples and the crowds that the way he would provide their salvation—radical self-sacrifice motivated by love—would form the path that they, too, must follow, both as disciples and witnesses (“for the sake of the gospel,” verse 35). Jesus called them to give up their rights to the “self in the full sense of that term” (Bock 2015, 245), in the assurance that they would gain much more: reconciliation with the Father, adoption as his children, the indwelling power of the Spirit to live as his witnesses, and eternal life (John 1:12; Acts 1:8; John 3:16).

While the coming of the Messiah revealed the full nature of God’s redemptive plan, the call to self-surrender flowing from obedient trust traces back through the narrative of the Old Testament. The original choice of humanity to rebel against God meant that sin twisted the very core of their beings. Seizing the power to decide good and evil for themselves, the first humans fractured their relationship with the Creator and thus their identity as God’s image-bearers, leading to spiritual alienation at their core, reflected in broken relationships with each other and the creation. Therefore, God’s initial call to Abraham and his later dealings with Israel always included the requirement to turn away from the sinful, fractured self, to risk losing “the whole world” as Jesus later put it, and turn in faith toward him. God called Abraham to leave his family and ancestral lands and head out toward a land God would show him (Genesis 12:1). Abraham gave up his family’s idols, his security, his culture, and the right to control his destiny, because he trusted that God would fulfill his promises. Abraham’s later test of faith, the sacrifice of Isaac, re-affirmed his willingness to “deny himself”—to surrender his most precious treasure and symbol of his future, in obedient trust to the Lord’s command (Genesis 22). Renouncing the old self, whether the traditional self-in-community or the more modern Western individualistic self, has always been part of turning toward the Creator so that his image in humanity may be restored.

Ultimately, neither Abraham nor Israel as a nation could live in perfectly obedient trust with the Lord; because of sin, they failed to exemplify the righteousness produced by faith which God requires of his image-bearers. But Jesus, the Son of God in the flesh, the new Israel, the new Adam, answered the call on humanity’s behalf and perfectly lived out that trusting obedience, all the way

to death on a cross. When men and women deny their sinful, broken selves and turn in faith toward Jesus, they become sharers in his Sonship by grace. United with Christ, their “selves” are healed, and his indwelling Spirit empowers them to live in a new way—to receive new identities, to be born again (John 3:16). Robert Stein says that answering the call of Jesus directly confronts the human aspiration to control our own lives, because we must say “no to the self as the determiner of one’s goals, aspirations, and desires; to accept the cross of suffering shame and/or death” (Stein 2008, 406). Encouraged by the epistles of the New Testament, the Spirit-empowered believers of the first centuries attempted to live out this life of radical faith, self-surrender, and obedience to Christ, and the world around them turned upside down as a result (Crum 1984, 4).

Self-denial as Witness in Acts and the Early Church

“Losing Yourself” in the First Decades

Jesus’s call to “lose oneself” for his sake was picked up and demonstrated by new believers as the gospel swept from Jerusalem outward into the Roman Empire, according to the book of Acts. Jewish Christians bravely followed the Spirit’s leading by accepting Gentiles into the family of God, “losing themselves” as they risked their own social standing and acceptance in synagogues for the sake of the gospel of grace (Acts 15). Believing Gentiles, for their part, renounced idolatry and in so doing risked their reputations and livelihoods, as they burned magic books and disrupted the trade in silver idols in Ephesus (Acts 19).

Paul directly connected the way he and other Apostles lived and responded to hardship as giving credibility to their role as gospel-bearers, and he urged believers in Corinth to follow their example rather than imitate the competitive, self-centered ways of the world. After declaring his commitment to “the ministry of reconciliation,” (II Corinthians 5:18), Paul explains: “We commend ourselves in every way, by great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities ...patience, kindness, the Holy Spirit, genuine love ... as having nothing, yet possessing everything” (II Corinthians 6:4-10). Possessing the “everything” of forgiveness of sins, new life in Christ, a new spiritual family, and the power of the Spirit for daily life gave Paul and others courage in the face of the loss of “the whole world”—their former certainties and earthly security.

The Apostle Peter seemed to think that facing repercussions for following Christ was normal, and after reminding believers of their amazing inheritance as citizens of Christ’s kingdom (I Peter 1:4), he urged them to be careful how they lived in front of the world. Their actions and attitudes, especially under pressure, revealed the reality of Jesus to their neighbors.

Do not repay evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary, bless, for to this you were called, that you may obtain a blessing ... but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame (I Peter 3:9-16).

The New Testament writers never held back from urging both Jewish and Gentile believers to embrace a new ethic based on what their Savior had done. Blessing instead of reviling, sharing truth with gentleness and respect, cheerfully accepting “suffering for righteousness’ sake” (I Peter 3:14), the new community burst into the world full of the Spirit’s power in weakness, not their own strength.

“Losing Yourself” in the First Centuries

Far from being an unattainable idea, self-denial and obedience to the Way of Christ were normative for early Christians, Eckhart Schnabel argues. They accepted that joining the family of Jesus included “losing,” or renouncing the socially-acceptable, familiar ways of living in order to walk a new path. “Paul, Peter, and John and presumably all early Christian missionaries regarded the behavior of the followers of Jesus in the contexts of the growing churches and of daily life in their families and at their workplace as important for missionary outreach” (Schnabel 2004, 1547). Larry Hurtado links the Christians’ distinctive lifestyles to persuasive witness, since for any new movement to grow, “there has to be a clear difference between being an insider to the group and an outsider” (Hurtado 2016, 7). According to his research, the best estimates of Christian growth indicate that there were around 1000 Christians in 40 AD and five to six million by 300 AD (Hurtado 2016, 4). If early Christians had simply “affirmed and reflected” the values, beliefs, and behaviors of their neighbors, no one would have bothered to join them (Hurtado 2016, 10). Instead, using the *Epistle to the Diognetus* of the second century as an example, early Christians exhibited radically counter-cultural behaviors, Hurtado argues. They turned their backs on the idolatry of their society and such evils as the killing of unwanted infants, and they refused to participate in the violence-as-entertainment spectacles of the gladiator arena (Hurtado 2016, 144, 149). Perhaps even more surprisingly, following Jesus’s example the Christians responded to slander, insults, and rejection by loving, offering respect, and praying for those who hated them (Hurtado 2016, 153).

Glenn Fluegge, commenting on the early church’s evangelistic methods, writes that “the most immediate, unintentional, and yet inestimably effective attraction to the church was the pious life of its members” (Fluegge 2016, 10). The Christians’ way of life contrasted greatly with the Roman or Greek way of life, especially in the areas of sexual fidelity, household relationships, and moral courage even in the face of martyrdom (Fluegge 2016, 10). Referencing Tertullian, Fluegge observes that the behavior of ordinary Christian men and women—like sacrificial generosity, caring for widows and orphans, and all kinds of “deeds of love”—gave outsiders “a favorable and attractive view of the church. This left them prepared for more intentional, and thus structured, methods of evangelism” (Fluegge 2016, 11). Along with transformed family and household relationships, their patient endurance under pressure and praying for their enemies rather than striking back reflected their deep confidence in God (Schnabel 2004, 1537, 1547). In his exploration of evangelism in the Early Church, Michael Green agrees that “there can be no doubt that it was the changed lifestyle of the early Christians which made such a deep impact upon classical antiquity” (Green 1970, 19). In fact, Green argues, Christians’ bold insistence on real conversion, real faith, and total surrender to Jesus as Lord and Savior was what made an impact in an ancient world “more relativist and far more pluralist than our own” (Green 1970, 21).

Implications for Witness among Spaniards and Secular Post-Christians Today

Particular Challenges of a Secular Context

In some sense, no one should be surprised that Jesus’s call to deny self and follow him are not palatable to Spaniards who are part of a Western and global culture, which Charles Taylor famously described as an age marked by expressive individualism and self-orientation (Taylor 2018, 473). A recent survey of 1600 people in the region of Catalonia reported that 47% of people still considered themselves religious, but only 4.2% of the group felt that these beliefs *held any significance* for their personal relationships (Departament de Justicia 2020), indicating that the link

between religion, belief, and behavior has been broken. Meanwhile, the World Values Survey reports that more than 60% of Spaniards say they attend religious services once a year or less, with 46% saying almost never (World Values Survey 2017-2020). Spaniards, like many others in the Western world, are seeking various non-religious ways to make sense of life. In popular culture, Christianity represents many things which young secularists reject: moral obligations, traditions, authority, restrictive gender roles and definitions, and exclusivist claims about good and evil as well as heaven and hell.

In addition to the offensiveness of Christianity's perceived values, the postmodern embrace of "mosaic" beliefs and flexible, non-binary thinking creates unique problems for Christian witness (Lee 2015, 29; Lee 2021). Spiritual experiences may truly impact a secularist who also feels free to fold that experience into her own ever-changing, self-defined worldview. As Pastor Anne Johanson writes about conversion in Denmark (Johanson 2020, 126), spiritual experiences can be catalysts, but alone they don't bring people to Christ. Verbal proclamation also plays a large and necessary part in any true witness to Christ, yet individualist, educated Spaniards—like anyone raised in a Western culture—are adept at hearing and believing only the parts of the gospel message that resonate with their own core values. As Pastor Johanson states, the third facet of effective witness among Europeans (after spiritual experiences and competent preaching) is contact with the visible witness of life in the faith community (Johanson 2020, 170). Here, the Early Church again has much to teach modern gospel-bearers.

Renouncing the Idols in the Post-Christian, Secular West

The Book of Acts tells the story of new believers in Ephesus burning their magic books and idols, and the believers of the early centuries willingly faced Roman persecution and social exclusion as they rejected Emperor-worship and lived publicly as Christians. Both offer examples of people "losing themselves"—renouncing their old ways, turning their backs on their old identities, behaviors, and familiar sources of security—for Jesus's sake as they embraced new life and new identities as citizens of his kingdom. The question raised for this article's focus concerns what, exactly, *renouncing the idols* looks like today in secular Europe and Western cultures. There are still people who engage in explicit sorcery and magical rituals, but millions more are enslaved to the modern idols of materialism, self-sufficiency, sexual freedom, and the pursuit of fame. The witness of the Early Church suggests that Christians in today's secular societies must grapple with their own entanglement with contemporary idols and provide visible examples of what it looks like to renounce those idols' power and live instead under Christ's authority. To believe that Jesus is the only Way, Truth, and Life, rather than one option among many similar paths, non-Christians must see Spirit-empowered believers living radically different lives, especially in core areas such as sexual purity, loving one's enemies, and refusing the temptations of greed, power, and self-definition (Newbigin 1995, 38). If Christians seem to have renounced nothing but, instead, just like the pagans around them pursue influence by worldly means, retaliate when attacked, are more concerned with their own rights than the well-being of others, or are obsessed with "finding the real self" as Charles Taylor put it (Taylor 2018, 475), they weaken their ability to testify to Jesus as King (II Peter 2:2).

In cases where Christians are indeed committed to a lifestyle rooted in biblical principles and Jesus-honoring attitudes of gentleness and respect, the question must then be asked if their lives intersect enough with non-Christians for their witness to matter. Gerald Sittser explains that early believers had very little privacy. By necessity, living in densely populated urban areas or multi-

family structures, the daily choices that transformed their core domestic relationships (husbands and wives, parents and children, masters and servants) played out in front of their neighbors, leading to natural questions about the faith that inspired such change (Sittser 2019, 111). Today, for many Christians employment is the only place they regularly encounter others of different worldviews. Housing, school, and social interactions provide what might be better possibilities for both verbal and non-verbal relational witness. In any case, Christians must intentionally choose to interact in these arenas. As secular societies drift away from the particularly Christian moorings of their heritages, believers may be tempted to protect themselves and their children by creating a safe, parallel world, shutting out secular influence in order to freely practice the Christian faith. While these Christian subcultures may provide a comfortable option for weary believers, they create barriers to natural witness.

The gospel must be contextualized for secular Spain and the Western world in the sense of communicating in ways that non-believers understand, and social media and other new technologies have much to offer in this area. But contextualization also means that we who bear Jesus's name, whether Christian leaders, pastors, missionaries, or ordinary disciples, must understand the every-day idols of Western culture and offer a credible alternative to living under their power. Urgent questions demand answers:

- *What are believers in a secular society willing to lose for Jesus's sake and the gospel?*
- *How do believers live out their faith transparently and openly among their neighbors, so that their Jesus-honoring choices provoke curiosity and engagement?*
- *What is today's equivalent to early Christians burning the magic books, renouncing idolatry, and facing persecution with humility and gentleness toward accusers?*

Believers certainly face pressure as Western societies become more antagonistic toward faith, but if the goal is to persuasively witness to Jesus, Christians must be careful not to emphasize their rights in a way that owes more to Enlightenment principles and individualism than to the Cross. The secular person's viewpoint—"Jesus is fine, as long as he doesn't interfere with your freedom"—can only be shaken by seeing the followers of King Jesus renouncing their idols, embracing his Way, and experiencing abundant life despite loss and hardship. Counterfeit freedom is exposed by encountering the real thing. The way of our crucified King turns secular society's obsession with self-protection and self-empowerment upside down: when those who love Jesus lose themselves for his sake, everyone gains.

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