

# Challenges and Encouragements for Evangelism Today

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When a world-wide audience watched the March 2, 2018 funeral service for Billy Graham, commentators suggested Graham's death marked "the end of an era." But there was no universal agreement on exactly what was ending. Certainly Billy Graham's preaching ministry, a ministry that touched millions worldwide, was ending—at least with live preaching (Graham's sermons continue to be broadcast on Christian television and via the Internet). Perhaps it ended the practice known as "mass evangelism," though history cautions us not to pronounce its demise too quickly.<sup>1</sup> Some may have thought (or even wished) it ended the movement known as "evangelical Christianity" and one of its defining characteristics known as "evangelism." But to paraphrase Mark Twain for this context: "the reports of the death of evangelism have been greatly exaggerated."

Our word evangelism is taken from the Greek word *euangelion*, translated

“the gospel.” Within the word evangelism we see the word evangel, meaning “good news.” The evangel which lies at the heart of the Christian faith is the good news about who God is, and how he has provided reconciliation for sinful humanity.

So evangelism is to announce the *euangelion*, the good news. The noun form appears over seventy times in the New Testament (NT), while the verb form, *euangelizō*, appears over thirty times. We find both the noun and the verb forms in Romans 1:15, “So, for my part, I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome.” And indeed, if you have good news, life-saving news, even eternal life-saving news, how can you not desire to share that message with others?

I would like to highlight seven challenges to evangelism that Christians face in today’s world, as well as seven encouragements for evangelism today. These challenges will focus on a North American context, as some of these issues look very different in different parts of the world.

## **CHALLENGES TO EVANGELISM**

The church has always faced obstacles to evangelism, from outright persecution to hostile cultural forces to evil spiritual forces in the heavenly places. As I view the contemporary religious and cultural landscape in North America, I see seven challenges to evangelism.

### ***Loss of “Home Field Advantage”***

Peter writes in 1 Peter 2:11: “Beloved, I urge you as aliens and sojourners to keep away from worldly desires that wage war against the soul.” This perspective of living as “aliens and sojourners” was an everyday reality for the first century church and increasingly is becoming a reality for believers in North America. Christianity no longer enjoys a “home field advantage” in North America. When I played sports in high school, I loved home games. Having a home field advantage meant the majority of the crowd was cheering for you to succeed. It meant if the referee had to make a judgment call, more often than not you would get the call, as the benefit of the doubt always seemed to favor the home team. For most of its history, the church in North America has functioned with a home field advantage. The broader culture was supportive and even non-church attenders recognized the value the church brought to society.

But that reality has changed. Increasingly, secular society seems to view the church as part (if not a *major* part) of the problem instead of as a key part of the solution. Increasing numbers of people are not cheering for the church to grow and thrive but are hoping the church “loses” its influence in society. Public perception of Christian faith in North America is in decline. The scene has shifted where Christians are now seemingly functioning with every game being an “away game” in front of a hostile crowd. Non-Christians view Christianity as irrelevant, hypocritical, and self-focused, concerned primarily about money. North America is rapidly becoming less and less “Christian.”

Yet throughout twenty centuries of church history the worldwide church has often lacked a “home field advantage,” and still has grown and thrived. One benefit of losing this advantage is that it helps facilitate the death of “consumer Christianity,” hopefully to be replaced with “costly discipleship.”

### ***Hypocrisy in the Church***

The church has long battled the charge of “hypocrisy,” but with the 24-hour news cycle today, and many in the media celebrating every instance of “Christian hypocrisy” they can publicize, the church must confront this challenge head-on. What is a hypocrite? A hypocrite is someone who says one thing, yet does another. Some days many of us accomplish that feat before breakfast! How should the church respond to this challenge thrown at it by a skeptical world?<sup>2</sup>

It is not helpful to try and deny there are hypocrites in our churches. Because our complete sanctification awaits us in another life, we all at times will act inconsistently with what we affirm. The church truly is a “hospital for sinners,” not a “museum for saints.” But not just sinners—*repenting* sinners who are seeking the Lord’s help to walk in a manner worthy of their calling. Non-Christians aren’t looking for perfection in the lives of believers, but they are looking for reality—and they have every right to expect it. If non-believers don’t see that Christ has made any difference in our lives, why would they want to follow him?

Recently my wife Sharon and I were able to share the gospel with our Uber driver. He told us he had rejected Christianity because of hypocritical Christians he knew. I explained to him that Sharon was a piano teacher and asked him this question: “If one of Sharon’s students plays Mozart’s ‘Sonata

in C' poorly, should we conclude that Mozart was a terrible composer?" He replied, "Of course not!" I then pointed out that just because some Christians follow Christ and his teachings poorly, we should not conclude that Jesus is not worth following.

As believers, we must realize God has always used imperfect vessels to accomplish his purposes. That means there is hope for you—and hope for me! We must be willing vessels for God to work in us and through us.

### ***Evangelism is Seen as Unhealthy and Even "Wrong"***

Evangelism presents an offensive picture to some people outside the church. When some hear the word evangelism, they equate it with hardline psychological pressure, yelling through a bullhorn, or proselytizing people against their will. Yet those negative connotations express poor stereotypes of an activity that by its very nature means the communication of "good news." And indeed, if you have good news, life-saving news, even eternal life-saving news, how can you not desire to share that message with others?

Barna's extensive survey highlights some disconcerting positions on this issue, not only from outside the community of faith but also from within the church. According to Barna, 47% of Millennial practicing Christians say it is wrong to evangelize.<sup>3</sup> And between 1993 and 2017, Barna's surveys displayed dramatic changes in the position of Christians concerning sharing their faith:

Just one in 10 Christians in 1993 who had a conversation about faith believed evangelism was the job of the local church (10%). Twenty-five years later, three in 10 said so (29%). Nine out of 10 agreed in 1993 that "every Christian has a responsibility to share their faith" (89%). Only two-thirds said so in 2017 (64%).<sup>4</sup>

In addition, over one-fourth of Christians surveyed also believe it is "wrong to share one's personal beliefs with someone of a different faith in hopes that they will one day share the same faith (27%)."<sup>5</sup>

My evangelism professor in seminary, Dr. Roy Fish, used to say that many believers had adopted a form of "closet universalism." I hope Dr. Fish was wrong on this point, but the statistics indicate a significant percentage of believers no longer affirm the necessity of sharing the gospel with others. We face an on-going challenge of reminding not only non-Christians but also Christians of the imperative nature of evangelism, and that the gospel is indeed "good news."

### ***Selfishness on the Part of Christians***

Observers of church life in North America have noted how many faith communities seemingly have adopted a “consumer church” mentality. Some Christian believers act as if the church exists solely for them, ignoring the dictum that “the church is the only institution in the world that exists primarily for those not yet a part of it.”<sup>6</sup> Instead of being able to affirm the principle, “It is so not about us,” some Christians seem to think it is all about them.

This self-centered attitude can rear its ugly head in a variety of ways. Fear of rejection when sharing the gospel is the epitome of selfishness, where we place what others think about us as more important than them hearing the gospel of Jesus Christ. The call to discipleship is a call to surrender to the Lordship of Christ, to “live for an audience of One.” Perhaps some of this attitude is due to unregenerate persons in the church, to those who think they are saved when they are not,<sup>7</sup> but some of it must also be attributed to genuine believers who are walking in the flesh and not in the Spirit.

Believers must get outside of their “comfort zones” to connect with unbelievers. Barna’s survey revealed a shocking reality: “Almost two in five practicing Christians say they have no non-Christian friends or family members (38%).”<sup>8</sup> The title of Rebecca Manley Pippert’s excellent book on evangelism, *Out of the Saltshaker and into the World*,<sup>9</sup> reminds us of what we must do. We must reach out to a lost and dying world and seek to build relationships of trust.

Richard Niebuhr, in his classic work *Christ and Culture*, sets forth different ways the church and Christians have related to culture: Christ against Culture; Christ of Culture; Christ above Culture; Christ and Culture in Paradox; and Christ Transforming Culture.<sup>10</sup> Joe Aldrich, in his book *Lifestyle Evangelism*, has simplified Niebuhr’s discussion. Aldrich’s analysis mirrors Niebuhr’s, but it uses terminology that I find more understandable for today’s context. Aldrich suggests there are four different ways that Christians and churches can relate to secular culture.<sup>11</sup>

### ***Rejection***

This response involves withdrawal and isolation from “sinners.” It was the approach followed by some in the monastic movement, as they sought to keep sin “outside the walls” of their monastery. This response is common among fundamentalist Bible-believing Christians, based in no small part

on 2 Corinthians 6:17, “come out from their midst and be separate.” This position has a valid point: Christians should not be involved in sin and evil. But to adopt the rejection position—to withdraw completely from the world—means that we can no longer be salt and light.

### *Immersion*

I may be the first Baptist you have ever read who would write against immersion (but this is a different type). Aldrich uses the term immersion to highlight the exact opposite response to rejection. In this position, the Christian or the church radically identifies with the culture but in so doing becomes essentially indistinguishable from the world. The salt loses its saltiness and effective evangelism does not take place. The Christian message becomes so diluted that it loses its distinctiveness.

People who adopt an immersion approach have close proximity to lost people, but they have no distinctive message to share. They have neglected the admonition of Scripture to not let “the world cram you into its mold” (Rom 12:2, Phillips translation). The immersion approach allows the world to do just that—to cram the Christian or the Church into the world’s mold. It is reminiscent of the young couple who asked a pastor of a very liberal church, “What do you believe here?” The pastor replied, “What do you want us to believe?”

### *Split Adaptation*

This approach blends the rejection and immersion options. In reality it is a form of spiritual schizophrenia. This person tries to be a citizen of two worlds and attempts to make a home and live completely comfortable in both worlds. He drifts with the majority opinion. This person could be described as a “Sunday-only Christian.” On Sunday, he follows the rejection approach, but on Monday through Saturday he adopts the immersion approach. It is like the man who applied for a job, listing as his references his pastor, his deacon, and his Sunday School teacher. The interviewer asked, “Can I get the names of some people who know you the rest of the week?”

### *Critical Participation*

This is the approach Aldrich advocates, and one that I agree with as well. It seeks to follow Jesus’ admonition to be “in, but not of the world” (John

17:14-16). Believers are to be spiritually distinct from the world's culture but not socially segregated from it. This position is the most challenging of the positions to adopt because the believer must always live in the tension of being "in, but not of" the world.

The Apostle Paul modelled this approach for us in 1 Corinthians 9. He writes, "For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I may win more" (1 Cor 9:19). Paul had the status of a free man, but he made himself a slave of all. He maintains, "I have become all things to all men, so that I may by all means save some" (1 Cor 9:22).

Paul is prepared to accommodate however he needs to in order to reach people with the gospel. He adopted a person-centered approach in his witnessing. Paul never denied the truth, never comprised in the realm of morality, but adjusted as much as he could to the perspective of those whom he was with. He did not adopt the approach, "when in Rome, do as the Romans do." Accommodation for evangelism does not mean the witness involves himself or herself in sinful practices. Paul did not behave like them, but he identified with them as much as he could so he could reach them. Again, Paul was not teaching that "the end justifies the means." He accommodated only in those things that were not sinful. He was not committing sins to try to further the gospel, but he was sacrificing liberties for the sake of the gospel.

In 2 Corinthians 8-9 Paul deals with the theme of Christian freedom. Paul drives home the point in chapter 8 is that "Christian freedom has limits." In the context of chapter 8, it is limited by our love for "weaker" Christians, for those not as spiritually mature. In chapter 9 he gives us another reason why we would choose to limit our liberty. We limit our liberty for the sake of the gospel. In chapter 8 our liberty must be limited by our love for other believers. In chapter 9 our liberty must be limited by our love for the lost. Paul expressed it well in 2 Corinthians 4:5, "We do not preach ourselves, but Christ Jesus as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Christ's sake."

Barna notes that more than half of Christians report "having two or fewer conversations about faith with a non-Christian during the past year (56%)."<sup>12</sup> Pippert is correct—believers need to get "out of the saltshaker and into the world." We need to build relationships of trust with unbelievers. But we must also be ready and willing to share the gospel with "strangers," with people we do not yet know well. There are scores of people around all of us who are not blessed to have a Christian family, a Christian neighbor, or a Christian

friend. If the only way to reach them is through building a relationship of trust, some people are never going to hear the gospel. We should do all we can to build relationships. Christians, of all people, ought to be in the ministry of relationship building, meeting new people, caring for people, and loving people. But if we adopt the viewpoint that we should not talk to someone about Christ until a relationship of trust has been built, countless numbers of people will never hear the gospel.

Mark McCloskey convincingly argues this point:

There are just too many people who need to know Christ as soon as possible to insist that effective evangelism must be relational in approach. Not everyone is blessed to have Christian friends who can “flesh out” the life of Christ. Not everyone is fortunate enough to witness the life-changing power of the gospel and new life in Christ as it is manifested corporately in the local church.

Thus, a philosophy of evangelism that insists on the presence of a relational element (as a normative practice) will unfortunately exclude those not privileged to have meaningful exposure to Christian friends or the corporate witness of the church. This is why many groups practice initiative evangelism and employ strategies that encompass masses of people. It is not that they are against the relational element in evangelism, but they do not allow it to determine the scope of their outreach. Let’s reach our friends. Let’s do whatever it takes to communicate authentically to them. But let’s not forget that others also need to hear the gospel.<sup>13</sup>

### ***Biblical Illiteracy***

In his article titled “The Scandal of Biblical Illiteracy: It’s Our Problem,”<sup>14</sup> R. Albert Mohler notes the huge problem of biblical illiteracy not only outside the church, but also within the church. That lack of biblical literacy no doubt plays a role in some of the negative attitudes Christian believers have about evangelism (see above), but also provides challenges for believers in communicating with non-Christians who have no religious background or context for understanding the message of the gospel. In my lifetime I have witnessed a shift from what I call an “Acts 2 culture” to an “Acts 17 culture.”

In Acts 2 we observe Peter preaching the good news, the gospel of Christ, to believing Jews. Peter does not have to explain who God is; they already know the name Yahweh. In essence, Peter starts “in the middle” of the gospel message. He assumes a lot on the part of his audience. I bring this up because I grew



up in an Acts 2 culture. In my elementary school, we had the Ten Commandments on the wall of the school right next to the American flag, and we began every day of elementary school with our teacher leading the class in prayer. That meant that the students, even if they were not churchgoers, had a basic understanding of who God is, and even the gospel message. Evangelism in an “Acts 2” society focuses on clarifying for people what many of them already know (at least more or less). It involves “connecting the spiritual dots” for them.

Fast forward to today. We no longer live in an Acts 2 culture. Rather, our culture more accurately reflects Acts 17. In this chapter we also have a preacher and an audience. Paul is the preacher this time. The audience in Athens is not comprised of believing Jews; the audience is filled with pagans, with Gentiles, with those who have little to no knowledge of the true God. Paul notes that they had set up idols to all kinds of gods. Lest they miss any gods, they even set up an altar to the unknown God. Paul told them that what they worshipped in ignorance (this unknown God), he was going to explain to them. Paul did not follow the example of Peter. Instead of starting in the middle, Paul began with creation, with who God is.

Why do I emphasize this point? Because I am convinced that here in North America, we are no longer an Acts 2 culture; we are an Acts 17 culture. In our culture we can no longer assume that people have a basic level of understanding of Christian truths. That reality is significant because many of the evangelistic materials that are still utilized today were developed back during a time in which you could assume some knowledge of God on the part of your hearers. People used to know you were talking about the God of the Bible when you said, “God.” Today when people mention God, they could mean the God of the Bible, or Oprah Winfrey’s “god of the week.” Oprah would have “religious guests” on her program every week promoting some new version of spirituality. We must help people understand who the biblical God truly is.

An article on evangelism in *Christianity Today* in 1991 describes the reality of our situation: “... growing Western populations who have no Christian background, memory, vocabulary, or assumptions; they are ‘agnostics,’ who do not know what Christians are talking about.”<sup>15</sup> I agree with that analysis, and almost three decades later find it even truer. The majority of people I talk with about the gospel are not “agnostics” as much as they are “agnostics,” ignorant of the basic truths of the Bible and Christianity. We no longer can assume a basic Christian worldview. People no longer have Christianity as

their starting point for their religious explorations. We cannot assume that even in America—a nation filled with churches and Bibles and Christian radio stations—that persons have heard the gospel. Many have not heard the gospel and rejected it—they simply have never heard it. Many people in North America do not have even a basic understanding of key biblical themes or even know the basics of the gospel message.

### ***Exclusivity of the Gospel***

Another challenge to evangelism faced by the church in North America is the “scandal” of the gospel message. In a post-modern society, for any person or any group to claim they have “*the truth*” seems brash and arrogant. In a pluralistic culture, it just “makes sense” to people that there must be *many* ways to find peace with God.

Yet the NT witness is clear. John reports that Jesus claimed to be the “way, the truth and the life,” and that “no one comes to the Father but by me” (John 14:6). Peter asserted in Acts 4:12, “And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved.”<sup>16</sup> And it must be noted that these assertions were made in the midst of tremendous religious pluralism! The Bible refers to numerous gods and systems of worship in various cultures of the ancient Near East.

According to the NT, men and women are not “anonymous Christians” already in Christ and only needing to be told so. They are “dead in their trespasses and sins,” “separated from Christ,” and “perishing.” J. I. Packer concludes:

It thus appears that the case for other forms of faith beside Christianity being ways of salvation is forlorn indeed. Without Christ, we are without God and without hope. Non-Christian religions exhibit much that is noble and many insights that are true, but they do not exhibit saving grace. So far as the way of salvation is concerned, “believe on the Lord Jesus Christ” really is the last word.<sup>17</sup>

### ***Lack of Confidence in the Gospel***

Some believers today seem to have lost confidence in the gospel message. Perhaps it is because it has been some time since they have seen someone come to faith in Christ and display the fruit of conversion. Obviously, if one lacks confidence in the gospel, he or she will be reluctant to share it with

others. If we have given up believing that Jesus still changes lives today, we will not be his witnesses.

## **ENCOURAGEMENTS TO EVANGELISM**

The challenges listed above may seem daunting, yet this particular historical context also produces great opportunities. People are ignorant but many of them are open. This era is not a discouraging time to be involved in evangelism—far from it! I am reminded of the story of two soldiers huddled together in a foxhole, pinned down by enemy fire. During a lull in the shooting, one soldier peeked out to survey the situation. He exclaimed to his fellow soldier, “We are surrounded by the enemy!” to which the second soldier replied, “That’s great! Let’s not let any of them get away!” While we must never view unbelievers as “the enemy” (they are held captive by our true enemy, Satan), we certainly are surrounded by those who do not know Christ. How can we seek to not let any of them get away? I trust these seven encouragements for evangelism will challenge and inspire us as we seek to be faithful to the task of being “fishers of men.”

### ***The Great Commission is Still Operative***

The gospel is “good news”—it has been good news and it always will be good news. The task we call “The Great Commission” (Matt 28:18-20) is still in force today. The “Tomb of the Unknown Soldier” is located in Arlington National Cemetery in Washington, D.C. During the ceremony of the changing of the guard, one soldier says to his replacement: “Orders Remain Unchanged.” In a much greater way, Christ says to each new generation of believers, “Orders Remain Unchanged.” You shall be my witnesses!

Romans 10:14 is as true today as it was when Paul first penned these words: “How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?” The Great Commission is still operative.

### ***Online Worship Services are becoming a “Front Door”***

As I write these words, we have seen churches all across North America cancel their gathered worship services out of love for neighbor in the midst

of the COVID-19 crisis. Last week our church scrambled to broadcast our first “online” worship service in the church’s history. While online worship cannot and should not ever attempt to replace the gathering together of God’s people, technology has allowed thousands of churches to reach people with the gospel message who have never set foot inside their church sanctuary. For example, my own church in Louisville, Kentucky, averages around 200 people for Sunday morning worship. And yet last week we had ten times that many connect to the church through the service being streamed on Facebook Live. We have already heard from people in the community who plan to visit the church once our doors are open again.

And even more encouraging to me, I have had three unchurched friends, two of whom I have known for more than 30 years, and one whom I have known for over 50 years, reach out to me following their listening to the sermon online. Our online services are creating an opportunity for many gospel conversations that humanly speaking, would not have happened apart from the online connection.

### ***Learning How to Listen***

One of the key results from the Barna survey was that when non-Christians were asked what qualities they would look for in a person with whom to talk about faith, the number one quality was “listens without judgment.”<sup>18</sup> Much of our evangelism training focuses on us learning how to talk, and rightly so. But good evangelism is a dialogue, not a monologue. And we do not receive much training in how to listen. My wife Sharon is one of the best personal witnesses I know, and it is in no small part due to her listening skills. Barna’s survey encourages us that we can be more effective in witnessing if we will become a good listener.

We must listen with alertness and sensitivity in order to understand what the other person believes and where he/she is coming from. Listening is hard for us, because in a dialogue, when the other person is talking, our mind usually begins formulating what we will say next. Several verses in Proverbs 18 remind us of the importance of active listening: “A fool does not delight in understanding, But only in revealing his own mind” (v. 2); “He who gives an answer before he hears, It is folly and shame to him” (v. 13); and “The mind of the prudent acquires knowledge, And the ear of the wise seeks knowledge” (v. 15).

If we will learn to ask good questions and then listen, most people will open up and will talk about their life and their beliefs. They will often self-diagnose themselves in terms of what they are trusting in and where their hope is found. Evangelism involves both talking and listening. Listening is an act of love. It communicates, “I care about you enough to value what you have to say.”

Sharon and I have had wonderful opportunities to practice listening through inductive Bible Studies with non-believers. Two studies we highly recommend are *Christianity Explored*<sup>19</sup> and *Christianity Explained*.<sup>20</sup>

### ***The Gospel is Still True and Powerful***

In spite of what people in secular culture think, or how some people inside the church doubt the power of the gospel, people are still lost and they still need Christ. The Gospel remains the power of God for salvation!

Paul had full confidence in the power of the gospel, as he evidences in Romans 1:16, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.” Do we really believe the gospel is the power of God for salvation? We too often settle for a religion of the “possible.” We give up on some people and think, “There is no way that person’s life could change—they are too far gone.” But we must remember Paul, the chief persecutor of the Christian church, became one of the greatest Christians to ever live. John Newton, a slave trader and alcoholic, wrote the hymn, “Amazing Grace” with these powerful lyrics, “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me.” Chuck Colson, the “hatchet man” of the Nixon administration, was powerfully converted and wrote the best-selling books, *Born Again*, and *Loving God*. Nowhere in the Bible does it say, “Go into all the world and share the gospel with everyone who looks like they are a good candidate to become a Christian.” We are to share with all! To every person!

My undergraduate studies were in engineering at Kansas State University. Dr. Dudley Williams, one of the top nuclear physicists in the country, was one of my professors. Dr. Williams was one of a handful of scientists chosen to participate in the first atomic test made by the U.S. Government. He shared in class one day about that first atomic test in the desert sands of New Mexico. He told us special gauges were designed to be able to record the magnitude of that first blast. But when the blast occurred, all the needles moved quickly to their maximum reading. He laughed as he told us,

“The top engineering minds in the country had totally underestimated the power of the atom.”

I fear that is what is happening in the hearts and minds of some Christians today. They are underestimating the power of the gospel, and that is causing them to be hesitant, perhaps even ashamed of sharing it with others. In Mark 4, Jesus teaches what we know as the Parable of the Sower. I think we often misapply this parable. The sower went out to sow. He did not go out to inspect the soil and sow or withhold seed based on the state of the soil. No, the sower sowed the seed everywhere. In our witnessing we need to stop being soil inspectors and start being sowers of the gospel seed!

Another way to phrase this truth is: “Never say ‘no’ for someone else.” We make that mistake far too often. We decide someone is not good soil, and we say “no” for that person, withholding the seed of the gospel. Jesus is telling us we are going to receive different responses to the message, but that is not our responsibility. What is our responsibility? The sower went out to sow—we are called to be sowers, not soil inspectors!

There are individuals and churches all over the world who are reaching people even though others are telling them there are too many challenges, that it is too difficult. I am convinced there are two types of attitudes among Christians and churches:

1. We can't reach people today—it has become too difficult.
2. With God's help, we will reach people.

I am convinced they both are right in their own way! Those who say “we can't,” usually don't. Those who say, “with God's help we can,” usually do.

### ***The Power of Testimony***

While some Christians may think sharing one's personal testimony is an “outdated” method, I believe it has great value in a postmodern culture. A personal testimony or “Faith Story” is you telling the story of how you became a Christian and what Christ has done in your life since then. Criticism of this approach often stems from the testimony focusing a great deal on the person and very little on Christ. However, one's conversion testimony serves as a helpful tool as long as the gospel is clearly communicated in the testimony.

Christ should be the focus of your testimony, not your deeds or misdeeds. A good conversion testimony uses *your* story to tell *Christ's* story, the good news of the gospel message. The Apostle Paul certainly believed in this approach, as he utilized it three times in the Book of Acts (Acts 9; Acts 22; Acts 26).

Use your story to tell his story, but make sure you share with humility. D. T. Niles, a theologian from Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), offered this pungent definition: "Evangelism is witness. It is one beggar telling another beggar where to get food."<sup>21</sup> Reminiscent of the four starving men in 2 Kings 7:1-9 who stumbled upon an abundance of food, this definition reminds us that we have come to faith due to God's mercy and grace. The difference between the two classes of beggars in Niles's definition is that one has discovered the Bread of Life and the other needs to know that truth.

This definition reminds us of the importance of humility in our witness. If our salvation were something we could earn by our own efforts or good works, then we would have grounds for boasting. But the Scriptures constantly remind us that salvation is a gift from God, a gift that is completely undeserved on our part (Eph 2:8-9). The ground is indeed level at the foot of the cross.

This humility is crucial in our witness because a major reason unbelievers are turned off by Christianity is they perceive Christians as somehow claiming "they are better than everyone else." If we understand grace we will be humble. Christians should be the most humble people in the world. We can share the gospel with deep conviction but also with genuine humility. We truly are "one beggar telling other beggars where to find food," and our personal testimony can be a strategic way to explain the gospel message.

### ***Embarrassment of Riches in Training Tools***

We live in a day where we have an embarrassment of riches in terms of evangelistic tools and methods. How encouraging to have at our disposal so many different ways to communicate the good news of redemption in Christ! But the sheer volume of options can lead us to the "paralysis of analysis." We aren't sure which is the *best* method to use, so we end up using none of them! D. L. Moody was confronted one day by a person who disapproved of his method of witnessing. Moody replied that he wasn't overly fond of it himself and asked, "What methods do you use?" "Oh, I don't have a method," the critic replied. "Well," Moody retorted, "I think I like the way I do it better than the way you don't!"<sup>22</sup>

Too many people get sidetracked in debates over methodology. Jesus used different methods when healing blind men.<sup>23</sup> On one occasion he merely spoke a word (Mark 10:52), another time he touched a blind man's eyes (Matt 9:29), and on another occasion he placed mud on a blind man's eyes (John 9:6). Can you imagine what might have transpired had these men happened to meet together to discuss their experiences? "Isn't it wonderful how Jesus heals by simply speaking?" one would say. "You are wrong," the second man would protest, "he uses touch." The third man would interject, "You are both wrong! He doesn't use words, or touch—he uses mud to heal!" Their argument could have led them to form three new denominations: the Touchites, the Speakites and the Mudites. I tell people, "If you don't like a particular method of witnessing, don't waste precious time and energy criticizing it—use one you feel comfortable with and get on with the task!"

Part of our evangelistic task is highlighted by 1 Peter 3:15, "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." Barna's survey shows that a significant number of non-Christians might be "more interested in Christianity if they had more evidence (44%)."<sup>24</sup> Greg Koukl, whose book *Tactics* is an extremely helpful resource for doing apologetics in a postmodern context, writes: "The Great Commission task assigned to believers is to communicate the gospel as clearly, graciously, and persuasively as possible and let God use these efforts to draw people to Himself."<sup>25</sup>

Faith in Jesus Christ is not a "leap in the dark" as it is sometimes described by skeptics. Faith in Jesus Christ is instead a "step into the light." We have good reasons for believing what we believe! When people ask genuine questions, we need to seek to answer those questions. Paul Little quotes John Stott as offering a wonderful balance with this observation: "We cannot pander to a man's intellectual *arrogance*, but we must cater to his intellectual *integrity*."<sup>26</sup>

### ***Christ Has Promised to Build His Church***

A seventh source of encouragement is that Christ has promised to build his church (Matt 16:18). The Gospel has sounded forth for over twenty centuries and will continue to do so until Jesus returns. Matthew 24:14 instructs us that the gospel must be preached as a witness to every nation, and then the end shall come. Revelation 5:9, 7:9, and 14:6 assure us that in



heaven will be people from every tongue and tribe and nation. The Great Commission will be fulfilled! Hear this heavenly witness: “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ; and He shall reign forever and ever!” (Rev 11:15).

We labor in the confidence that the work will be finished. Evangelism, as the heartbeat of theology, directs our energy to that goal toward which history is moving—the return of Christ and the hastening of his kingdom. Victory is certain! In the councils of eternity, the celebration has already begun. As Andreas Köstenberger and Peter O’Brien maintain, “This theme of God’s saving purposes reaching the ends of the earth forms a grand envelope that contains the entire story of Scripture.”<sup>27</sup> God’s saving plan is the major thrust of the Scriptures from beginning to end.

With this vision before us, let us pick up the shout of heaven, and go forth to proclaim his Kingdom.

*Until with yonder sacred throng  
We at His feet may fall,  
To join the everlasting song,  
And crown Him Lord of all*

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<sup>1</sup> Those who argue Billy Graham’s death signals the end of mass evangelism should reflect on these words from an evangelist of a previous era, Oswald J. Smith. Writing in 1932, Smith asserted:

Well, now, where in such a church is there room for an Evangelist? Why, he is simply crowded out, for that kind of programme doesn’t need him. Think you the churches of today are pleading for evangelistic services? Could Crossley and Hunter persuade the worldly churches of this Laodicean age to close their doors and unite in a city-wide campaign? Can you picture the modernistic ministers of this generation sitting together on the same platform, lauding, praising and backing a Moody and Sankey campaign? Certainly not. Evangelism has been ruled out of court. It is no longer the order of the day. Nor will the churches ever again throw open their doors to traveling Evangelists, as they did a generation ago. That peculiar type of Evangelism has gone and gone forever. (Oswald J. Smith, *The New Evangelism* [Toronto: The People’s Church, 1932], 10-11).

God raises up people in his time and in his way for his work. Just as the ministry of Billy Graham could not be foreseen by Smith, those “doomsayers” who confidently predict the demise or death of mass evangelism after Billy Graham might look foolish in the years ahead. While such predictions “might” hold true for North America, in many parts of the world today, mass evangelism is thriving.

<sup>2</sup> In the recent Barna Report, entitled *Reviving Evangelism*, survey results from non-believers show that 34% would be more interested in Christianity if the faith had a better reputation. See Barna Group, *Reviving Evangelism: Current Realities That Demand a New Vision for Sharing Faith* (Ventura, CA: Barna Group, 2019), 13.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

- <sup>4</sup> Ibid., 36.
- <sup>5</sup> Ibid., 46.
- <sup>6</sup> Source unknown.
- <sup>7</sup> For a helpful discussion on this issue, see Dean Inserra's new book, *The Unsaved Christian: Reaching Cultural Christianity with the Gospel* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2019).
- <sup>8</sup> Barna Group, *Reviving Evangelism*, 10.
- <sup>9</sup> Rebecca Manley Pippert, *Out of the Saltshaker and into the World: Evangelism as a Way of Life* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999).
- <sup>10</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York, NY: Harper, 1951).
- <sup>11</sup> Joe Aldrich, *Lifestyle Evangelism: Crossing Traditional Boundaries to Reach the Unbelieving World* (Portland, OR: Multnomah Books, 1981), 59–65.
- <sup>12</sup> Barna Group, *Reviving Evangelism*, 11.
- <sup>13</sup> Mark McCloskey, *Tell It Often, Tell It Well: Making the Most of Witnessing Opportunities* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1985), 171.
- <sup>14</sup> R. Albert Mohler, "The Scandal of Biblical Illiteracy: It's Our Problem," *Albertmohler.Com* (blog), January 20, 2016, <https://albertmohler.com/2016/01/20/the-scandal-of-biblical-illiteracy-its-our-problem-4/>.
- <sup>15</sup> George G. Hunter, "Can the West Be Won?," *Christianity Today*, December 16, 1991, 43–44.
- <sup>16</sup> Ted Peters notes that the concept of salvation through other religions makes a mockery of the early church and Christian martyrs: "This bold confession, 'Jesus Christ is Lord,' is itself a phrase which has accounted for numerous martyrs amidst a climate in which it was thought that only Caesar was lord. Would it have helped in the pursuit of truth for the early church to make it clear that it believed there was a single nameless and transcendent divine reality that was revealed equally through Caesar and Jesus, and that salvation could be found in both? Should Christians have affirmed the saving efficacy of Caesar right along with that of Jesus Christ?" See Ted Peters, "Confessional Universalism and Inter-Religious Dialogue," *Dialog* 25, no. 2 (1986): 147.
- <sup>17</sup> J. I. Packer, "Way of Salvation, Part IV: Are Non-Christian Faiths Ways to Salvation?," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 130 (April 1, 1973): 116.
- <sup>18</sup> Barna Group, *Reviving Evangelism*, 12.
- <sup>19</sup> Rico Tice and Barry Cooper, *Christianity Explored* (Milton Keynes: Authentic Media, 2002).
- <sup>20</sup> David Pawson, *Christianity Explained* (Ashford: Anchor Recordings, 2014).
- <sup>21</sup> D. T. Niles, *That They May Have Life* (New York, NY: Harper, 1951), 96.
- <sup>22</sup> Leighton Ford, *The Christian Persuader* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1966), 68.
- <sup>23</sup> Ibid., 125.
- <sup>24</sup> Barna Group, *Reviving Evangelism*, 13.
- <sup>25</sup> Gregory Koukl, *Tactics: A Game Plan for Discussing Your Christian Convictions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 37.
- <sup>26</sup> Cited in Paul E. Little, *Know Why You Believe* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 25.
- <sup>27</sup> Andreas J. Köstenberger and Peter T. O'Brien, *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth: A Biblical Theology of Mission* (New Studies in Biblical Theology 11; Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2001), 26.