

Friendship Evangelism

“Sharing Your Faith” by B. Palmer

“Everyone knows the Bible is filled with contradictions,” I asserted, smugly assuming that I had scored a point in the debate my friend and I were having. The conversation had begun innocently enough. He and I were members of a high school debate team, and we were at a tournament miles from our hometown. The debates were finished, and we were just killing time, waiting for the results to be announced.

At first our conversation was casual, but it became more intense when one off-hand remark made me realize for the first time that he was a Christian. I had always assumed Christians were ignorant and uneducated. Until now. This friend was not ignorant. On the contrary, he was extremely intelligent. I was intrigued by the idea that he had firm religious convictions.

And so I began to ask him questions. At first my questions were based on a desire to trip him up. But gradually, as my friend provided answers that made sense, my questions came out of a hunger I had never acknowledged. The real turning point in our debate was my assertion that the Bible contradicts itself. His answer stunned me.

“Where?” he asked.

That one word hit me with the force of a freight train. He had not argued with me. He simply asked a question I could not answer because I had not read the Bible for myself. I felt ignorant and exposed. For someone who had always looked at Christians as ignorant, I was forced to see that I was the one who was ignorant of what the Bible really contained. I knew that even nonbelievers admit that the Bible has been a vital force shaping Western civilization. I had to accept the fact that I had never examined this cornerstone of our culture.

More than two years passed before my friend ever knew the effect that conversation had on me. At the time, he thought I simply walked away from what I had heard. He did not know our discussion was never far from my thoughts until I finally acted on what I knew.

Do I Have To?

Often the fruits of such experiences are not immediately evident. For that reason, many Christians see evangelism as a burdensome and rarely successful chore—something to be avoided. But what responsibility to share their faith, if any, do Christians have?

Evangelism is the duty of all Christians. The Great Commission at the end of Matthew’s Gospel is a commission for all who follow Jesus Christ: “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:19).

In the video *Go For It!*, a primer on evangelism, British evangelist Ian Knox lists four reasons for us as Christians to share our faith. The first three relate to our duty: Christ commands us to, the world urgently needs the gospel, and the fields are already “ripe for harvest” (John 4:35).

The fourth reason relates to our own spiritual health. We share our faith because we cannot contain ourselves. This was true of the early church. When the religious authorities ordered the disciples to stop preaching the gospel, Peter’s answer described their burning desire: “For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:20).

Evangelism is not a matter of knowing all the answers, nor does it require that we have a sophisticated theological argument. Instead, it is a natural outgrowth of a deep faith that drives Christians to share their faith. It is something good that we want others to enjoy.

The flip side of this fourth reason is that sharing our faith cultivates a still deeper faith in us. In their book, *Becoming a Contagious Christian*, Bill Hybels and Mark Mittelberg touch on this idea. An enthusiastic faith is a contagious faith, and new believers are often the most zealous. When mature Christians see the enthusiasm of a new believer, they cannot help but examine their own relationship with God. And mature Christians who share their faith will find themselves in this situation repeatedly. “So what started as dutifully helping someone else,” Hybels and Mittelberg demonstrate, “changes into a personal desire for intimacy with God.”

Is Anyone Really Interested?

One of the greatest obstacles to Christians sharing their faith is the mistaken idea that no one is really interested, Hybels and Mittelberg note. “Most of us routinely make the mistake of assuming people aren’t really that interested in spiritual truth. But many people today are getting tired of living without ultimate purpose.... In fact, many of them are actively searching for answers.” [...]

Most of us are still uneasy and perhaps even afraid of sharing our faith. A cartoon captured this sentiment. A dispassionate pastor rhetorically asks his congregation: “The question is, How do we win the world to Christ ... with a minimum of fuss and bother?” Sharing one’s faith should not be burdensome - either to the Christian or to the unbeliever.

Relational Evangelism

Perhaps the biggest factor in our fear of evangelism is the idea that sharing our faith means standing on street corners flagging down unsuspecting sinners. This approach is usually ineffective.

The people who need the good news we bring live in a cynical time, an age without trust, even in little things. We all know, as they say, that there’s no free lunch, so we’re always suspecting a gimmick. How, then, could anyone expect to be effective offering something so intensely personal as the gospel of Jesus Christ to strangers?

Our society needs a different approach—an approach based on trust. That is how the concept of “relational evangelism” was born. “It’s the people we do know,” say Hybels and Mittelberg, “who have already developed a measure of trust in us and our motives, and are therefore most in range of influence.” When we concentrate on sharing our faith with people who trust us, our words and actions are far more natural. No longer are we faced with the need to manufacture some artificial system or argument.

“Far too many Christians,” assert Hybels and Mittelberg, “have been anesthetized into thinking that if they simply live out their faith in an open and consistent fashion, the people around them will see it, want it, and somehow figure out how to get it for themselves.” The realization that sharing one’s faith is much more effective when a Christian has developed close friendships with non-Christians is the premise of relational, or friendship, evangelism.

Most of us have grown accustomed to our own private worlds, comfort zones where everyone we are close to is a Christian. A few Christians even believe it is wrong to befriend unbelievers.

Spending time with unbelievers may be denounced as friendship with the world. Yet, without the willingness to penetrate the world of unbelievers, we'll never have the opportunity to share our faith with them.

Jesus did not restrict his love to those who sought him. He actively pursued sinners, spending so much time with them that he was judged a sinner himself by the Pharisees. His response put the matter in perspective: "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick" (Matthew 9:12).

The apostle Paul may well be the premier Biblical example of a Christian eager to share his faith. To do so, he actively befriended those in the world. "I have become all things to all men," he wrote, "so that by all possible means I might save some" (1 Corinthians 9:22).

The key to success in relational evangelism is not how well a Christian can argue, or how much he or she knows. The key is listening—really listening. One of the most important elements that leads to effective relational evangelism is the relationship between a Christian and Christ. We cannot expect success if we offer an answer to unbelievers that we have not accepted for ourselves. But when our words about Jesus Christ are based on lives that include him, others will be far more receptive to the gospel.

Starting an Epidemic

Hybels and Mittelberg, in *Becoming a Contagious Christian*, present the following formula for sharing one's faith: $HP + CP + CC = MI$.

HP stands for high potency, which refers to the kind of moral character that makes others take notice. It is a reflection of "Christ's influence in our lives" that makes "His power and presence ... undeniable to others."

The second component, CP, is close proximity, which means that Christians cannot spend all their time with other Christians only. We must mix with unbelievers as well.

CC, the third component, is clear communication, which requires the Christian to have a strong grasp on the essentials of the gospel. We do not need sophisticated theological language, but we must have a firm grasp of the essentials.

When believers have all three of these components in their lives, the inevitable result, according to Hybels and Mittelberg, is MI, or maximum impact.

Sharing our faith as Christians boils down to caring enough about unbelievers to lay down our lives in friendship, and, when the time is right, boldly discussing the good news of salvation through Christ. As Christians, we cannot succeed in sharing the gospel until we're willing to sacrifice. And that means learning to care for, to love, unbelievers as God does.

And, once we share our faith with others, it's important that we not abandon them. Like tiny babies, who are dependent on their parents for everything, newborn Christians need the support and help of mature Christian friends. That will mean helping them begin lives of Bible study and prayer. And it will mean sharing the joy of Christian fellowship.

A Measure of Success

Two and a half years had passed since my former debate teammate and I had discussed Christianity. Both of us had completed our first year in college. For him, our conversation was a distant memory. But to me, it had been a turning point, a catalyst that initiated explosive

changes in my life. That's why I had to tell him what had happened since that moment.

I rang his doorbell in anticipation. When he came to the door, I wasted no time telling him of my faith in Christ. I'll never forget how surprised he was. All he remembered was my hostile reaction to his words. Until I met him at his door, he did not know the effect he'd had on my life.

We cannot always see how God is working in our own lives, much less the lives of others. That's why we must be careful not to dismiss our conversations with unbelievers as ineffective. For most of those to whom we reach out, we'll only be one stop on their road to conversion.

Our measure of success cannot be quantitative—how many people come to Christ through us. Instead, we must measure our success in qualitative terms—how much we reflect the love of Christ and how willingly we share his gospel.

Relevant Scriptures:

Matthew 28:19-20 "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations..."
Luke 19:10 "For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost."
Romans 10:13-15 "How beautiful are the feet..."

Questions for Discussion:

1. According to Matthew 9:37-38, What does it mean for God to be the "Lord of the harvest"? How has God demonstrated this in Scripture, and in your own life? Does this offer any comfort when you think about evangelism?
2. When you look across campus, do you see a "plentiful harvest"? For you, who are among the harvest? List specific names.
3. What activities and initiatives can you incorporate into your weekly schedule to increase the time you spend with non-believers?
4. When it comes to sharing the Gospel, your story is a powerful tool. What are some of the highlights in your "transformation story" of how the Gospel has changed your life?
5. Which part of the equation is your greatest strength? Greatest weakness?
High Potency + Close Proximity + Clear Communication = Maximum Impact

Further Reading:

Reimagining Evangelism by Rick Richardson