

Conversational EVANGELISM

David Geisler
Norman Geisler



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*I dedicate this book to my three wonderful children,
Kristina, Jonathan, and Rachel,
who inspire me to give my all to God to leave no stone unturned
in coming up with fresh ideas to better equip those in
their generation to be more effective witnesses for Jesus Christ.*
David Geisler



*I dedicate this book with great appreciation to
my faithful wife, Barbara,
who has been proofreading my manuscripts for forty years.*
Norman Geisler

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Foreword

The first few times I got behind a pulpit to preach, I was preparing for a career in business. However, each time I finished delivering the message, a handful of people would tell me that the gift of evangelism upon me was very evident. The more I preached, the more I heard the same comment. Although it was encouraging to hear, I really did not understand the implications of what they were saying. Preaching was so new to me that I had not gone deep enough to reflect on the affirmation they were giving me. I was still just a young lad from India who had been transformed by my new life in Christ, planning to work in a field for which I had studied. So out of courtesy I would just nod a sincere thank you and leave it at that.

Yet, in truth, a special sense of mission and conviction would rise up in me each time I stood to proclaim the beautiful Gospel of Jesus Christ. I had an intense urge to persuade. From the very beginning, I knew I wanted to speak to people who were on a quest, people whose minds were gripped by the hard questions of life, people who were hurting inside and needed someone who could speak to those issues. God was shaping that call in me by using other people to help me understand what it meant to do the work of an evangelist.

The word *evangelism* often stirs strong and conflicting emotions,

even for the follower of Christ. Engaging with others in this seemingly daunting task may incite enthusiasm as well as discomfort. Yet one thing is certain, as article four of the Lausanne Covenant recognizes: “Our Christian presence in the world is indispensable to evangelism, and so is that kind of dialogue whose purpose is to listen sensitively in order to understand. But evangelism itself is the proclamation of the historical, biblical Christ as Savior and Lord, with a view to persuading people to come to him personally and so be reconciled to God.”

As such, evangelism done properly will awaken a sense of need within the hearer, and more importantly, evangelism done persuasively will show that if Christianity is true, it will provide an answer to that need. Christ must be seen not only to be the answer; His words must also be seen to be true. This is a definitive difference because the claim of the believer—of a “new birth”—is unique. After all, no Buddhist or Hindu or Muslim claims his or her life of devotion to be supernatural, though they may often live a more consistent life than believers in Christ.

As followers of Jesus Christ, not only do we claim the truth of a supernatural transformation, we must remind ourselves that defending the faith we believe also calls upon us to live the faith we defend. First Peter 3:15 gives us the charge: “But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer (*apologia*) to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.” Notice that before one is qualified to give an answer, there is a prerequisite. The lordship of Christ over the life of His follower is foundational to all answers given.

Once we hold that word and deed in balance, the opportunities are immense all around us to speak to the honest questioner and even the evasive one. The starting point for the follower of Christ is that belief and conduct must be consistent. From there, the all-important key in evangelism is to listen beyond the question to the questioner. To answer the question but not the questioner is as much of a breakdown as a faith that is not lived out in the practical.

One of the most extensive conversations Jesus had—His conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well—greatly surprised His

own disciples (see John 4:1-26). You recall that the woman raised one question after another, as if they were really her problem. It would have been easy for the Lord to call her bluff with some castigating words. Instead, like a sensitive and nimble-handed goldsmith, He rubbed away the markings of sin and pain in her life until she was amazed at how much true gold He brought out in her. He gave her hope, knowing all along who she really was on the inside. The value of the person was an essential part of Jesus' message—and this must be so for us as well. Then we will be able to listen sensitively in order to understand what is really being asked, and reach those we are listening to so that they might listen as well.

We often underestimate the role we may play in clearing the obstacles in someone's spiritual journey. A seed sown here, a light shone there may be all that is needed to move that person one step further along the way. Often the conversation will move from the smoke-screens of supposed questions of the mind to the real questions of the heart. Effective evangelism finds the bridge to connect both. The best apologetic is able to travel the journey with the questioner, connecting the head with the heart.

When one considers those who have made an impact in the field of evangelism and apologetics, the names of Francis Schaeffer, C.S. Lewis, and Norman Geisler come readily to mind. Norman Geisler has had a significant impact and share in my life. I studied under him as my professor, and he is, in my estimation, one of the finest apologists ever. I look back with deep gratitude to God for the role Dr. Geisler has played and continues to play in my life. His discipline is exemplary, his expertise wide. Anyone who hears him is amazed at the range of Scripture he draws upon and the breadth of philosophy within his grasp. Of great value to any reader of his books is to see how his philosophical prowess never overrides his deep commitment to the Scriptures. It was the balance between his love of the Scriptures and his rigorous argumentation of God's Word that gave me the imperatives I needed to preach and teach, especially in areas of great resistance. My life as an evangelist and apologist has benefited greatly from his influence and from observing and studying his writings.

In this work, I am especially thrilled that his son, David, has followed in his father's footsteps, also blazing new paths with his work through Meekness and Truth Ministries. My colleagues and I have had the privilege of working alongside David in Singapore and India and have found his material invaluable in various settings. Our students who have studied under David have nothing but the deepest admiration for the way he understands the listener and gives answers that bring the truth to the level of the questioner's felt need.

Each generation needs voices like theirs that never forget the past but speak to the present in preparation for the future. I am so pleased to write the foreword to *Conversational Evangelism*. It is truly a winsome and effective presentation of how skeptics perceive the Gospel and how we believers might help them discover its life-transforming truth for themselves. While recognizing the vital and indispensable role of the Holy Spirit in the process, the Geislars illustrate that asking probing questions and pointing out the inconsistencies between belief and behavior tills the ground and helps remove long-entrenched barriers to the Gospel. I enthusiastically recommend their pre-evangelism understanding and study. Anyone who wants to do evangelism in this age of graduate-level skepticism without losing the simplicity and sublimity of the Gospel will find this book a treasure.

Ravi Zacharias, author and speaker



Introduction

I now understand better what is holding back many people from coming to Christ, i.e., the barriers they encounter in understanding and then in embracing the Christian faith. As I become more equipped and emboldened to add the spiritual dimension in my conversation with friends and colleagues, I discover that people are willing to engage in conversations of a spiritual nature much more often than I previously thought.

—ELDER HIAN-CHYE

In spite of your great trepidation, your friend tells you it will be an experience worth remembering. You ignore your fear and tell yourself you'll be okay. So you step into the roller coaster and strap yourself down knowing that if you just make it through to the end in one piece, that will be a great success. You may not even entertain the possibility that you will enjoy the ride. The bottom line is to just get through it so you can say that you've done it.

In many ways doing evangelism these days can be much like riding a roller coaster. You don't really want to do it, and you certainly don't expect to enjoy it. Worst of all, through the gut-wrenching ups and downs, you always feel like you end up where you originally began.

But what if evangelism could be different? What if it could be something you actually enjoy doing? What if it could be something you do, not only because you have an obligation to do it, but more importantly because you see in very tangible ways how your obedience to Christ can make a difference in the lives of those you care most to reach? What if it can be something you enjoy doing so much that you end up doing it every day for the rest of your life? What if, as a result of learning how to effectively build bridges to the Gospel, you feel more and more compelled to make the most of every encounter with your nonbelieving friends to help them take steps to the cross? What if in each encounter you could make your spiritual dialogue a more pleasant experience for both of you?

This book is an attempt to make this a possibility in the life of the average Christian who increasingly finds it difficult to witness to those in a post-Christian world. Provided that we have the right framework for what evangelism is and have been equipped to engage people in our contra-Christian culture, we believe that not only can we make progress in our witness to people, but we can even enjoy the ride!

Furthermore, we are also convinced that we can be good witnesses even when we don't always desire to be. Even when we're not looking for open doors, we can still have an impact on people we regularly rub shoulders with if we remember at least two things. First, we must remember to expand our definition of success in witnessing (we'll talk more about this in chapter 1). Second, we must remember not to cover up any light that has already been revealed to our non-Christian friends and remain willing to make the most of all the divine opportunities God gives us (1 Peter 3:15).

In order to maximize your efforts in using this book, we want to clarify a few things. First, while some of the concepts in the following chapters may seem difficult to understand, or even mechanical and impersonal, *carefully learn each step in order* (don't skip ahead). Start practicing all of the exercises at the end of each chapter under the Reflection and Application sections. Also, when applicable, refer to the additional resources available at our website (www.conversationalevangelism.com)

that may go with a particular chapter. Working through these will help you get a better handle on the concepts in each chapter before you venture into the next and learn other new concepts. Building a strong foundation now will make the later sections easier to learn.

Second, developing a new skill takes practice, so don't short-circuit the process. Take the time to learn this material well enough that it becomes a part of the fabric of your witnessing style. Remember that the art of engaging others in spiritual dialogue takes time and practice. This is not a skill we can master overnight. So don't be discouraged or frustrated if your first attempt to apply these principles doesn't turn out exactly the way you thought it would. Don't be surprised if people don't respond to your approach in a more positive manner than you originally thought. We must learn to crawl before we can walk, and we have to learn how to walk before we can run with confidence. So don't rush the learning process or get disheartened that you're not advancing more quickly in learning to use this approach.

Also, keep in mind that *our struggles in evangelism are not primarily about methodology but about maturity*. Do we have a heart for God and do we care about the things God cares about (lost people)? If we have God's heart, we will do whatever we can to advance His kingdom purposes in every conversation we have with our nonbelieving friends.

Once we have the right posture in serving our Master and Savior and a passion for the lost around us, we may find the methods described in this book helpful for better engaging others in spiritual conversation. But please don't confuse what our priorities should be. First, we should ask God to develop in us a greater heart and passion for the lost. Once this happens, we will find it easier to apply the principles in this book. Once our heart is right with God, we can begin to talk to people in a more effective way so that many may believe (Acts 14:1).

One other thing to note: the methodologies taught in this book are designed to give you new tools you can add to your tool belt to use in your witnessing. Certainly these are not the only tools you should use. Jesus and His disciples used many different approaches in witnessing to others. Our conviction, however, is that the tools you'll discover in this

book need to be a part of every Christian's tool belt, especially because of the world we live in today.

Are you ready to take that next step of faith? The journey begins today!

The Need for Pre-Evangelism in a Postmodern World

The Need to Overhaul Our Evangelism Paradigms

Something is missing today in our approach to evangelism. Methods and tools used in the sixties and seventies don't have the impact they once did. Our models for evangelism need an overhaul. While proclaiming the Gospel may be relatively simple, getting to that proclamation is not. Worse yet, we now live at a time when people may think we are evil for believing there is only one way to heaven. As a result, it's imperative that we modify our existing models to include other elements necessary for success. Such a paradigm shift is needed for at least three reasons.

Many People Are Less Interested in a Simple Presentation of the Gospel

First, there is less and less interest in the Gospel message itself. Consequently, Christians today find their traditional approaches to evangelism somewhat limiting. It was common 30 to 40 years ago to use a simple tract to share the Gospel with others, especially on college campuses. Many baby boomers were won to Christ back in their youth

because someone shared the Gospel with them in this way. Today it is much more difficult to reach people by just sharing a simple four-point Gospel presentation. This is true of people in the East or West.

The director for a large Christian ministry on a campus in the US once confessed to me (David), “Only on a good day do I help someone take a step closer to Christ.” Expectations have changed, even among college workers in the last 30 years. A former seminary student of mine in Singapore suggested that something is missing in our approach to reaching students in the East. She said, “As a campus ministry staff person, I am trained in using a simple Gospel presentation and some apologetic skills, but I have problems trying to integrate them during evangelism. When people indicate that they are not interested, I can only ask them for the reason and then invite them for an evangelistic Bible study or share my personal testimony.” She felt limited in her ability to reach students with the training she had received in evangelism, especially with those who were not yet ready to hear about Christ.

A former country evangelism director for a large college ministry in Asia confessed how the training we gave her and her staff have helped her to be successful, now that she is back in the workplace. After using some traditional approaches in witnessing to her colleagues and seeing some resistance, she remembered what she had learned and, as a result, saw greater spiritual openness. “The more I thought about what happened,” she said to us, “the more I realized that in today’s generation, people would generally not give Christians a full uninterrupted ten minutes to share the Gospel with them. It is more likely that we share the Gospel through injecting it into normal conversations of everyday life.”

We are not advocating that we get rid of all the evangelistic tools we’ve used in the past. God can and does use these tools with those who have some receptivity to the Gospel. What is needed today, however, is a tool that can supplement what we already know about evangelism, especially when presenting the Gospel to those who are indifferent, skeptical, or even hostile to the claims of Christ. Not everyone is at the same point in their openness to the Gospel, and we need to use different approaches depending on someone’s spiritual openness.

The World We Live in Has Changed

The second reason we need to develop a new model of evangelism is that the world we live in has changed in ways that often create barriers to the Gospel. The world today can be characterized by a rejection of moral absolutes, a deep religious skepticism, and an indifference or outright rejection of objective truth.

The Rejection of Moral Absolutes. Sheryl Crow's song, "Every Day Is a Winding Road," sums up the situation well in these words: "These are the days that anything goes."¹ We live in a different world than our parents did, a different world with a different and relativistic value system. Unfortunately, our young people have discarded many of the moral values that make up the fabric of our society. This rejection of moral beliefs has caused some major repercussions to our effectiveness in evangelism.

Cultural anthropologist Gene Veith says, "It is hard to proclaim the forgiveness of sins to people who believe that, since morality is relative, they have no sins to forgive. . . . It is not the lunatic fringe rejecting the very concept of (absolute) truth, but two-thirds of the American people."² Another has said, "As we approach the twenty-first century, it does not take a rocket scientist to recognize that our entire culture is in trouble. We are staring down the barrel of a loaded gun, and we can no longer afford to act like it's loaded with blanks."³

One of the characters in Fyodor Dostoyevsky's classic novel *The Brothers Karamazov* contends that if there is no God, everything is permitted. Unfortunately, this pervasive perspective has led to many serious consequences. Newspapers remind us daily of the painful repercussions of a culture teetering toward not only financial bankruptcy but more importantly moral bankruptcy.

It is especially difficult to share Christ with those who have been brought up in an atmosphere of relativism. An increasing number of non-Christians regard our message as irrelevant, judgmental, or no better than any other perspective. As a result, many in our culture are predisposed to not even give the message of Christ a hearing. This makes our task in evangelism more difficult than ever. Those who have been

inoculated against the very concept of ultimate truth may be indifferent to the “Good News” if they do not realize there is such a thing as “bad news.” Consequently, we must defend the concept of absolute truth as we try to explain more clearly to those we witness to why we believe that Christianity is true and other religions are false.

But it is not just the irreligious we need to worry about today. Even many church people are having a difficult time swallowing the idea that absolute truth exists. More Bible-believing, self-described “evangelical Christians” than ever before now think there are ways to heaven other than Jesus.⁴ Some who call themselves Christians also have a hard time believing that God’s standard for reconciliation is perfection (Matthew 5:48; James 2:10), a standard impossible for any human to attain. Rather than seeing this as a motivation to embrace the cross of Christ and His atonement for our sins, many will lower God’s standards and try to convince themselves that if their good deeds outweigh their bad, this will create a big enough crack to allow them through the door of heaven.

Skepticism Toward Truth. We also live in a world that is becoming increasingly more skeptical about objective truth, especially religious truth. This skepticism is especially prevalent in the academic community. We must follow the lead of the biblical men of Issachar, “who understood the times and knew what Israel should do” (1 Chronicles 12:32). Part of understanding the times we live in is to realize that people generally do not take at face value what we say is true, especially if it is religious truth. It is common to believe that something cannot be known to be true unless it can be verified through the scientific method of repeated observations. Furthermore, a great number claim that we can’t come to any conclusion about any religious truth.

This skeptical disposition has led many to question whether we can really know that what was said about Jesus actually happened 2000 years ago. After I gave a student some evidence for Christ’s resurrection, he said, “If I were living at the time of Christ, I could make decisions about who Jesus is, but it’s been 2000 years. So, we cannot really make decisions like that anymore.”

In the last ten years, with the onslaught of books, movies, and

documentaries such as *The Da Vinci Code*, *The Gospel of Judas*, and *The Lost Tomb of Jesus*, and with the resurgence of atheism in our culture, skepticism about the history of the Christian faith is at an all-time high. In general, people in the first century did not have the obstacles that we have 2000 years later to believe what the New Testament writers recorded about the life of Christ. Even some non-Christian writers at that time acknowledged that Jesus was a wonder worker.⁵

The apostles and disciples also did not have to prove the existence of God or the possibility of miracles to their Jewish and god-fearing Greek audiences; most of them already believed in a theistic God. They also believed that something miraculous happened as evidenced by the empty tomb. This was common knowledge of the time.

Nonbelievers nowadays struggle with the question, “Can we know truth at all, even if it does exist?” Some people today deny that we can even know historical truths of recent times, such as the Holocaust, even though there are still people alive who survived Nazi prison camps.⁶ This overarching skepticism of reality itself in our society has made our task of evangelism more difficult in this new millennium. I remember one day trying to witness to a college student who was trying to convince me he didn’t even exist. So I wasn’t surprised that he had difficulty taking seriously anything the Bible had to say about him or about Jesus.

An Indifference Toward Truth. Our society has not only rejected truth and moral absolutes and developed a deep skepticism, especially regarding religious matters, but it has also developed indifference toward truth in general. The main problem in evangelism today is the “ever-increasing number of people who are simply not interested in hearing about Jesus because they are quite happy with their own views.”⁷ As a result, some will say, “It’s nice for you that you believe in truth,” or “It’s nice that it works for you, but it doesn’t work for me or mean anything to me. It may certainly be true for you, but not for me.”⁸

One international student said, “I agree with the point that religion is good for society...but what that religion is is not that important. It’s better to have people believe in something, rather than nothing. After I came to the US, I found that people who believe in God are generally

better off than those who believe in nothing. But it has nothing to do with the existence of God. It's a kind of social psychology."

These events should be no surprise to those who believe the words of Paul in 2 Timothy 4:3-4, "For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths." This was true in the first century, but it is even truer today. As the moral fabric of our society deteriorates, we will need to do more to supplement our evangelism just to get a hearing.

These are global changes. The sad truth is that the tsunami of post-modernism is sweeping from the West to the East with devastating impact. Christian apologist Ravi Zacharias says, "You are living in a time when the West is looking more like the East, and the East is quietly imitating the West."⁹

A former seminary student in the East, who is a college worker at a church in Singapore, sent the following urgent email one day about her difficulties in witnessing to college students.

Many students [in Singapore] don't think that there is a standard of right and wrong. Rather, they believe that this is up to the individual. This means they do hold a standard of right and wrong themselves, but they feel that each person's standard of right and wrong differs from the other. Personally, I feel stuck as to how to proceed on with the conversation. It's like saying that this food is nice for me but may not be nice for you. They relegate the standard of right and wrong to personal preference. *I find that I'm shaken. Not in terms of my faith, but in terms of how to answer such questions.*

It is clear that our approach needs an overhaul. Is the church ready to respond to these postmodern influences, especially in the way it goes about doing evangelism today?

An Increasing Intolerance Toward Those Who Believe in Absolute Truth

Third, the world's perspective on those who believe in an absolute truth has also made our task more daunting. Not only do we live in a world characterized by a rejection of moral absolutes, deep skepticism, and an indifference to or rejection of truth, there is also intolerance toward those who claim to know the truth. For us as Christians to claim that Jesus is the only way to God sounds arrogant and intolerant to our non-Christian postmodern friends.¹⁰ We are considered arrogant to even proclaim that we know the truth. Worse, it proves that we claim to be better than others or at the very least that we are intolerant of other beliefs.

If you add up all these factors, it is clear that our evangelistic task today is more daunting than ever before. It is also clear that our approach to evangelism in the new millennium needs to be repackaged to be more effective. Specifically, we need to add a new element to more effectively communicate the Gospel to this postmodern generation. This essential element to be added is pre-evangelism, or what we call here *conversational* pre-evangelism. (To learn how to teach our pre-evangelism materials in your church, download our free PowerPoint presentations, handouts, and audios at <http://www.conversationalevangelism.com>.)

Defining Pre-evangelism

What is pre-evangelism? If evangelism is planting seeds of the Gospel, then pre-evangelism is *tilling the soil of people's minds and hearts to help them be more willing to listen to the truth* (1 Corinthians 3:6). Tilling the soil is important because sometimes the ground is too hard, making it more difficult to plant the seeds of the Gospel in people's hearts (1 Corinthians 2:14). Any farmer knows that before he plants the seeds, he must look at the *condition of the soil*. Because of the kind of world we live in today, we may not be able to plant the seeds of the Gospel until we work the soil of people's minds and hearts. Failure to prepare the soil may lead to closed doors for planting seeds today and a reluctance to

consider the Gospel message in the future. There are also times when God may use more than just our words to till their heart and mind through pre-evangelism. He can also use the witness of our life.

In reality, we must do more than soften the soil; we must change the condition of the soil so that the soil becomes “good soil” (Mark 4:8). Many things can contribute to us developing good soil in the lives of our non-Christian friends. If we live godly lives and go out of our way to really love nonbelievers (John 13:35), this contributes to cultivating good soil. The witness of our godly life can help dispel the negative stereotype of the hypocritical Christian who preaches one message but lives another. We also contribute to the development of good soil when we see hearts soften rather than harden (Jeremiah 17:9; Ephesians 4:18) as a result of our prayers for people (James 5:16).

But there are other ways we can help create good soil, some of which we normally don't associate with evangelism. In the parable of the sower (Matthew 13), Jesus points out that “When anyone hears the word of the kingdom, and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart” (Matthew 13:19 esv). If someone has a distorted perspective about themselves, about God the Father, and about Jesus Christ, this may prevent us from cultivating good soil in that person's life. As a result, they may not understand the Gospel message and know that there is an all-powerful Creator who made all of us and holds us accountable to measure up to His standards, not our own. They may not appreciate what God did for us in the person of Jesus Christ.

Unfortunately, there are some (primarily in the East) who may even believe that mankind's problem is that we have forgotten that we are ourselves god rather than we have fallen short of the standards of a holy God. Some may have a hard time seeing themselves as a sinner if from their point of view there is no God and therefore no sins to forgive. Some may have deluded themselves to believe that Darwin's theory of evolution makes belief in God unnecessary. Others see no difference between Christianity and any other religion, and so they conclude there is nothing special about Jesus that demands our undivided loyalty.

When I (David) lived in Asia, I found that many weren't really motivated to hear what I had to say about Jesus because they didn't see any difference between what they believed and what I believed. In both the East and the West, in places where Christianity is more acceptable, I've discovered that some are under the impression that if they go to church, then they must be a Christian. They may even "believe that" Jesus is the Messiah, but they have never really "believed in" Him (see Matthew 7:22-23) and don't see the need for radical change. Certainly in the US we need to cultivate better soil in the lives of our non-Christian friends, especially since they believe they have no sins to forgive.

So if we can help people to better understand the misconceptions they have about themselves, God the Father, and Jesus Christ, this contributes to cultivating good soil so that we can plant the seeds of the Gospel in their hearts and see more fruit (Matthew 13:23). After all, wasn't this part of John the Baptist's ministry—to prepare people for the Messiah by getting them to acknowledge that they are sinners and fall short of the standards of the holy and righteous God who created them (Matthew 3:1-12; John 1:6-8)? Can we afford not to be involved in similar pre-evangelistic activities today?

Our deep conviction is that once we understand the times we live in, we will cultivate this fine art called pre-evangelism to create more open doors for direct evangelism.¹¹ Pre-evangelism must become an essential part of the evangelism training in our churches, seminaries, and mission organizations for us to more effectively reach people for Christ in this new millennium.

Redefining What We Mean by Evangelism

For pre-evangelism to be fruitful, at least two things need to be done. First, we need to redefine what we mean by *evangelism*. Most of us have been taught that evangelism is "proclaiming the Good News and inviting others to trust Christ." Yet, a valuable element is missing in that definition. The missing element is simply that *evangelism is a process*. The apostle Paul said, "I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow" (1 Corinthians 3:6). You and I may

not be able in one conversation to share the entire Gospel with our nonbelieving friends and then invite them to trust Christ. But we may be able to help them take a step closer to the cross with each encounter.

If we equate evangelism with reaping, we may get discouraged in our witness when those we speak with are not interested at first. We may feel like a failure because we are not “doing evangelism.” As a result, many of us may pull back from the task of evangelism, partly because we don’t like to feel like a failure.

Christian writer and former Cru staff member Tim Downs concurs with this misperception about evangelism. He says, “We have come to believe that there are only two kinds of Christians: the harvesters and the disobedient. We must begin to teach, with great urgency, that every laborer should learn to reap and that God will call some to exercise this role exclusively—but everyone can learn to sow right now, right where they are.”¹²

In the world we live in today, we may have to plant many spiritual seeds for a period of time before someone will seriously consider the person of Christ. We may have to till the ground before we have the opportunity to plant a seed. *We are not called to bring all persons to Christ but simply to bring Christ to all persons.*

In light of these concerns, it would be better to redefine evangelism in the following way: *Evangelism is every day and in every way helping your nonbelieving friends to take one step closer to Jesus Christ.*¹³ It may take some time for your nonbelieving friends to seriously consider the claims of Christ and make the decision to invite Him into their lives (John 1:12) and allow Him to change them from the inside out (Philippians 2:13). This means in practice that every day we need to ask ourselves, “What do I need to do today to help my nonbelieving friends take one step closer to Jesus?”

Changing Our Strategy in Evangelistic Encounters

Our goal in our evangelistic encounters need not be to get the whole Gospel message out at one time (and possibly alienate those we’re trying to reach). At times the Holy Spirit will prompt us to go

further, but we need discernment to know how much a person can hear from us at one time without becoming defensive and pulling back from the conversation. Rather, *we should take the long-term view and leave that person with the desire to continue the conversation.*

This is a different way of thinking about evangelism, but one that we believe all Christians must learn in order to more effectively reach this postmodern generation. This means that when we engage people in spiritual discussions at work or at school or in our neighborhood, we conduct our conversation in such a way that they desire to continue the spiritual dialogue the next time we see them. Too many times we have been taught methods of communicating the Gospel that are offensive. As a result it is not uncommon to find nonbelievers who do not want to have anything to do with Christians or the Christian message because of their distasteful first exposure to the Good News.

I remember getting into a taxi one day and discovering that the last Christian who had talked to this taxi driver thought he was God's last hope to save this man. When I tried to engage him in spiritual dialogue, he was not even open to a "lite" spiritual conversation.

We should be careful not to burn our bridges and make the task of another Christian who comes after us more difficult. Rather we should talk to our nonbelieving friends in a way that they actually want to learn more about our faith.

One day I had a conversation on a plane with a young Vietnamese woman who had just graduated from college in the US. I discovered that she had never heard the Gospel and didn't know anything about Jesus. She asked me why teaching apologetics was so important to me, which became the pivotal question that opened the door for me to share the Gospel with her. Apparently I had talked to her about my faith in such a way that she actually wanted to hear more about my Jesus. I was thrilled to be able to use her question as a springboard to share the Gospel with her for the first time!

This does not mean, however, that we will never run into people who are hostile when we try to talk with them about Christ using a pre-evangelistic approach. If you read Acts 17, you will see that there were at

least three different responses to the apostle Paul's message even though he took the time to build pre-evangelistic bridges to the Gospel. So we too should expect an occasional negative, sometimes even angry reaction from others when we speak the truth of Jesus (John 15:18-21). But we should do all we can to make our manner of communicating the Gospel as inoffensive as possible even if the message of our Gospel may be offensive to some (1 Corinthians 1:23-24; 1 Peter 2:8).

Changing our style of evangelism doesn't preclude the Holy Spirit from prompting us to say something to our friends that may be difficult for them to hear (and maybe for us to say). The blood of the Christian martyrs through the centuries is testimony to the fact that sometimes God calls us to say things as His ambassadors that may cost us our very lives. We may have friends who, to even get their attention, we need to metaphorically take a two-by-four and hit them over the head with the truth. Jesus was often very direct in His approach with the Jewish leaders of His day. Yet He used different approaches with different people.

So while the gospel is offensive (1 Corinthians 1:18-25; Galatians 5:11), we should continue to find ways to communicate it in the least offensive way possible. Remember that the Bible encourages us to be wise in the way we act toward outsiders (Colossians 4:5) and to be as wise as serpents but as harmless as doves (Matthew 10:16). That includes speaking the message of the Gospel in a way that it will receive the greatest possible acceptance. This perspective is consistent with the way Jesus and His disciples sought to reach others with the Good News.

Some may ask, How do we determine how deep we can go in our conversation with others about Christ and yet not burn our bridges? Experience has taught us that the more opportunities we have to interact with unsaved friends, family members, or coworkers in social or work settings, the more prudent it is to follow the dictum "less is more." However, in those situations where we may have little opportunity to continue the conversation at another time, sometimes "more is more." Sometimes it is more prudent to go further in spiritual dialogue with others, especially if we feel prompted by the Holy Spirit and may not have another chance to share with them the Good News of Christ.

However, with unsaved family members it's more important for them to see the Good News in our lives before they ever hear it on our lips. You've probably heard it said, "You may be the only Bible that some people ever read." While this may be so, in each situation we must remain sensitive to how the Holy Spirit is prompting us to respond, ready to go beyond the witness of our life.

Allowing Others to Surface the Truth for Themselves by Asking Probing Questions

For pre-evangelism to be fruitful, it also means that in certain situations, we will need to ask our nonbelieving friends questions that allow them *to surface the truth for themselves*. We do this by asking them probing and thought-provoking questions. This allows them the opportunity to both evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of their beliefs and to come to the right conclusions on their own. This is an important part of the pre-evangelism process of cultivating the right soil in their life.

Recently I was talking to a college student who confessed that he didn't think it really mattered what you believe as long as you didn't hurt anyone. So I asked him: "What if your best friend was trapped in a burning building, but he didn't want you to rescue him. Would you rescue your friend anyway?" The student agreed that even if his friend didn't want to be rescued, his beliefs were such that he couldn't just let his friend burn (see the video link C.E. in Action "Burning" at www.conversationalevangelism.com). This conversation could have turned out differently had I used a more direct approach that could have caused him to become defensive.

Asking probing and thought-provoking questions that allows others to surface the truth for themselves is a fine art that all Christians need to better cultivate. Sometimes these questions could be as simple as, "Have you come to any conclusions about Jesus?" or "How do you fit Jesus into your religious beliefs?" But these questions could also be quite deep. You could ask your atheistic friends, "Why is it more reasonable to believe that something came from nothing and

by nothing than to believe that something (us) came from something (an eternal God)?” Some questions could even help your friends to think deeper about what is really standing in the way of taking steps to the cross. For example, you could ask, “If you could know the truth, would you want to know it?” or “If you were to discover an overwhelming amount of evidence that supports Christianity, would you submit to Jesus Christ even if you didn’t want to because the evidence was so overwhelming?” (For further suggestions see “Thought-provoking questions and approaches based on the C.E. model” at www.conversationalevangelism.com.)

Asking probing and thought-provoking questions in our witness to others is certainly not something new. We see similar practices throughout the New Testament.

Jesus Is Our Example to Follow in Asking Questions. Jesus and His disciples used different kinds of questions and approaches depending on the audience they were addressing. So Jesus was not only the greatest teacher ever, He was also the greatest apologist who knew how to use questions effectively in His conversations with others.¹⁴ In fact, the Gospels record over 200 questions that Jesus asked. He was a master at asking questions.¹⁵

Jesus also knew the value of allowing others to surface the truth for themselves. When He spoke to the woman at the well (John 4), He did not tell her “turn or you will burn.” Instead, He asked her a series of thought-provoking questions in a way that piqued her curiosity. He told her that if she would drink of the water that He gives, she would never be thirsty again (John 4:14).

Jesus further knew that sometimes it was best not to tell people things so directly. Many times He told parables that not all of His hearers were able to understand clearly (Matthew 13:11-13). One of the reasons He did this was to create a greater spiritual hunger in those who were interested. He also knew that it is not always best to share all that we know all at once. Toward the end of His ministry He told His disciples, “I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear” (John 16:12). We may want to say many things to our nonbelieving

friends about Jesus, but sometimes they may be able to bear only a little at a time of what we want to tell them.

Jesus and His Disciples Are Examples to Follow in Finding Common Ground. Jesus and His disciples also understood the value of knowing the perspective of those they were speaking to and then building bridges to the truth from that perspective. For example, when Jesus healed the paralytic in Mark 2:1-13, He knew that the Pharisees understood that *God alone can forgive sins* (vv. 6-7). Knowing this, Jesus said to them, “‘But I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins.’ So he said to the [paralyzed] man, ‘I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home’” (vv. 10-11).

The apostle Paul had the same understanding in his interactions with others. In Acts 28:23, Paul’s approach to the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks was to help them see that Jesus’ life and death was the fulfillment of the Old Testament Scriptures, which they had already accepted. Yet, when Paul spoke to the Epicureans (atheists) and Stoics (pantheists) in Acts 17:22-29, he used another approach. Here, he spoke first about their false beliefs about God and not about the person of Christ. Likewise, when speaking to polytheists (in Acts 14) he had another strategy, beginning with nature and reasoning back to its creator. So, it is important that we choose the best approach to gain a hearing with those we are trying to reach (1 Corinthians 9:22).

Now while pre-evangelism can play a pivotal role to create open doors for evangelism, we would be remiss if we concluded that we must always do pre-evangelism first before we see fruit in people’s lives. If the Holy Spirit is working strongly in the lives of nonbelievers, convicting them of sin and developing in them an openness for repentance, sometimes (but not often) pre-evangelism is not even necessary. One day I was preaching in a church in Italy and because of time constraints, I didn’t offer an invitation at the end of my message (as I normally do). Yet after the service, an elderly man came forward to publicly receive Christ. I learned that this was the first time he had ever visited this church and apparently God was already working on his heart!

Although God doesn’t need us to do pre-evangelism to reach people,

there are still some good reasons why engaging in pre-evangelism can be very helpful in our witness today. We live in a world in which people are reluctant to be told what is true, but they may be willing to see for themselves, as in a mirror,¹⁶ the inconsistencies in what they believe. When this takes place, we can help them to build bridges to the Gospel, based in part on our mutually shared beliefs (1 Corinthians 9:22).

The Bottom Line About Using Pre-evangelism in Our Evangelism

Most Christians today understand the importance of actively engaging in evangelistic activity, but some forget the important task of cultivating *good soil* to create more opportunities for evangelism. Yet it is hard to deny that the more pre-evangelism we do, the more opportunities we will have to do evangelism. And the more opportunities we have to share the Gospel, the greater the likelihood that more people will come to know Christ. Therefore, the more pre-evangelism we do, the greater the likelihood that more people will come to Christ!

While this may be a new way of thinking about evangelism, I believe it is an important one that we must gain some traction on living as we do in a postmodern world. Certainly we must put new wine in new wineskins to more effectively reach the skeptics, pluralists, and relativists of our day (Matthew 9:17).

This combined approach of asking questions, surfacing doubt, creating interest, uncovering hidden barriers, and building bridges to the cross is at the heart of pre-evangelism. It attempts to loosen the soil of people's minds and hearts by surfacing uncertainties in their beliefs and creating a desire to hear more about Jesus. In doing so it helps to create the good soil (Matthew 13:8) that makes the Gospel seeds we plant potentially more fruitful. If we buy into this approach, we will also need to consider the important role that Christian evidences should play in our evangelism¹⁷ (we will talk more about this in chapter 9) even as our world and unfortunately some Christians move further from accepting any kind of objective truth.¹⁸

Sometimes we may not get far in helping people surface their

uncertainties and creating a greater interest to hear more about Jesus. In those instances, we may need to focus on cultivating good soil and leave the rest in God's sovereign hands so that someday (whether today, tomorrow, or in the distant future) the seeds that are planted will bear spiritual fruit. We must continue to do our part every day to help our nonbelieving friends take one step closer to Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 3:6).

Taking Those Next Steps

There are four simple steps that we can take in building pre-evangelistic bridges with those in our circle of influence, even if we go no further in this book than this first chapter.

First, we need to determine who the Lord is placing on our heart to reach out to. It may be a family member, a neighbor, a coworker, or a classmate. If God is working in our lives, it would be surprising if He didn't have someone He wants us to try to reach out to that He's already been working on.

Second, pray for open doors (Colossians 4:3). Remember that since God cares about the lost people in our lives, He will go before us and open doors for us to share His truth, even when we are not ready for Him to do that or feel ill-equipped to do so. God can even engineer the situation to make it easier for us to share the Good News with those we find most difficult to reach.

Third, look for divine appointments daily. Look for ways God is already at work in the lives of those you want to reach. Ask yourself, *What are the signs that God is already working supernaturally in someone's heart?* Remember the situation in Acts 8 where the Spirit instructed Philip to go speak to the Ethiopian eunuch? We need to ask ourselves each day who are the people God is placing in our path specifically so that we can help them take one step closer to Jesus Christ. I remember talking on a plane to a college student who was going to see his dying grandmother, likely for the last time, and I got a chance to share the Gospel with him. I had no doubt it was a divine appointment. To make the most of these divine appointments we need to ask God for

wisdom to know what to say in our conversations with others (James 1:5; Acts 14:1).

Fourth, we need to also make the most of every conversation that we have with nonbelievers to help them take one step closer to Christ (Colossian 4:5; 1 Corinthians 9:22). We can accomplish this by doing at least two things:

1. *Listening carefully in order to make every encounter count.* Sometimes we miss opportunities to help nonbelievers take a step closer to Christ because we aren't listening to them carefully enough and miss key ideas that could be a springboard to deeper spiritual dialogue. You may even be surprised at how easy it is to take normal everyday conversations and turn them into opportunities to share the Gospel with others. I was talking to a young man on a plane who said he was visiting a relative in Kentucky. So I asked isn't Kentucky a lot like Charlotte, NC (where I live) in that it has lots of churches. This opened a door for me to have a deeper spiritual dialogue by next asking questions about his religious background.

2. *Discovering what might create greater spiritual openness just as Jesus and the apostle Paul practiced (John 4:10; Acts 17:32).* For example, Jesus' approach with the women at the well in John 4 was to say, "If you drink of the water I give you, you will never be thirsty again!"

May God help all of us to understand, like the men of Issachar, the times in which we live, and may He give us the strength and courage to make the sacrifices necessary to equip ourselves so that we will know how to do pre-evangelism in the New Millennium.

Reflection

1. Ask yourself: Who do I know that I've had trouble witnessing to in the past using a more traditional approach to evangelism? What could I do differently in future conversations based on what I learned in this chapter (see John 16:12)?

2. If I truly believed that engaging others in pre-evangelistic conversations is necessary in today's world, I would

3. Remember to look for divine appointments daily. Ask yourself what are the signs that God is at work in someone's life (Acts 8:29).

Application

1. Determine the three people you most want to reach with the Gospel (this could be family members, friends, neighbors, coworkers, classmates). Write their names under the space provided in the "Pre-Evangelism Conversation Strategies" worksheet in appendix 1. Ask God for wisdom (James 1:5) to know how to build pre-evangelistic bridges in your conversations with them over the next few months.
2. Pray for the three people you identified in the previous question, asking God to move in their lives in a way that creates greater spiritual openness. Ask God also for sensitivity in using daily conversations in ways that create greater openness for spiritual dialogue.
3. Pray for God to strengthen you to be a positive and consistent witness to the people in your life; pray that Christ would be evident in your life as you interact with them day by day (Philippians 1:14).
4. Pray for divine appointments to plant seeds of the Gospel of Christ with those around you as you go about your daily

routine, and for God to give you the wisdom and strength to be a good witness in how you speak God's truth to them (Acts 14:1). Meditate on Colossians 4:2-6.

5. Ask God to help you make the most of every conversation you have with a nonbeliever from this day forward.