



**9-part teaching series**  
*by Rev. Robert Griffith*

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## BRIDGING THE GAP – Part 1

### 'Understanding Evangelism'

by Rev. Robert Griffith

For too long now evangelism has been seen as a separate ministry within the Church, reserved for those with a specific gifting. We do have people we call 'evangelists' who have a specific calling and gifting which may give them a bigger stage and a more focused way to bring the gospel to many people, however such people are not solely responsible for evangelism. We are *all* called to make disciples.

In fact, I would go so far as to say that evangelism is not really a ministry in and of itself. Evangelism is not a task to be ticked off on a list. Evangelism, when fully understood, is far more organic than that and it should permeate our lifestyle and be at the core of our life and calling as disciples of Christ.

To put it another way: **evangelism is not the cause of something, it's the fruit of something else.** Just think about that statement for a minute. Evangelism isn't something we do to achieve something else. Evangelism is what happens as a result of something else. That is: **evangelism is the natural outflow of a healthy Church.** The clearest example we have of this can be found at the very beginning of the Church as we know it. In the closing verses of Acts chapter 2 we have that wonderful snapshot of the Church in action and the fruit of that action:

**Acts 2:42-47** *"They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved."*

Where is the 'evangelism' in that passage? Well in today's thinking we would look for souls saved and that's all contained in the very last sentence. But it's important to note that it is the Lord Who is adding people to the Church. So does that mean we don't have a role to play in evangelism? Not at all. What the Lord does in that last sentence is actually the fruit which flows from what the Church does and who the Church is in the preceding narrative. When we are doing what we have been called to do; when we are being who we are called to be - then God does what He promised to do - He builds the Church. These verses in Acts 2 describe a healthy Church in action and the result is growth, spiritual and numerical growth.

Some would argue that such a view of the Church and evangelism is naïve and simplistic and that it's more complicated than that. They are probably the same people who have given us thousands of 'how to' books, seminars and conferences on evangelism over the years. How has that gone for the Church? Have our numbers exploded as a result? Sadly not. So perhaps a fresh look at evangelism in light of the New Testament and the experience of the early Church might be helpful.

How do we bridge the gap between the Church and world? How do we build a bridge between those who know they have been saved, redeemed and transformed by the power of the gospel and those who seem completely oblivious to the kingdom of God and the One Who died to reconcile them to their loving heavenly Father?

I want to spend some time over the coming weeks in this new teaching series answering that question as we examine the 'how to' of evangelism for all of us and explore some practical steps in bridging the gap between the Church and the world.

For too long now I believe Christians have been bombarded with jargon, clichés and philosophical ideas about reaching the lost and about being a devoted disciple of Jesus without being given the practical tools to make it happen.

We talk about:

*'letting go and letting God ...'*

*'not struggling in the flesh, but submitting to the Spirit ..'*

*'being called and led by God ...'*

*'exercising spiritual gifts ...'*

*'being Jesus in the market place ...'*

But what does all that really mean? *'being Jesus in the market place ...'* that sounds great, but what does that look like in the day-to-day realities of life? What actual choices should we make today and tomorrow in order for that to happen? These are just hollow words unless we get down to the level of personal, moment-by-moment choices.

Instead of always studying and talking about the 'big picture' concept of evangelism, something which can be too big to comprehend or identify with, maybe we just need to look for one prayer to pray this week; one smile to give; one hand to shake; one choice to make that we didn't make last week. Tiny, seemingly insignificant things - but like each brick in a house, over time, when they are all brought together, the result can be amazing.

I want us to get really practical over the coming weeks as we talk about things we can do and things we can stop doing in order to better fulfill our partnership with God in advancing His Kingdom. We will look at some of the key areas in which we can move and act in order to channel the power of God into areas where change can occur.

The term I want to use (and fully explain) is one you may have heard before. I want us to take a closer look at what we call *Relationship Evangelism*. There has been a lot written about 'Lifestyle Evangelism' and the two terms are very similar. However, I fear that the term 'lifestyle' can be nondescript and too general, whereas the term 'relationship' is far more specific and defined and I think it reveals the true heart of lifestyle evangelism.

### **What is *Relationship Evangelism*?**

As Christians, we have been provided with two primary means by which we can bring people to Christ and advance the Kingdom of God:

First and foremost we have the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

**Romans 1:16** *"I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes."*

Secondly there is also the manifestation of the gospel in the life of the Christian.

**1 Peter 3:12** *"Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us."*

*Relationship Evangelism* is adapting both these means (word and deed) to the best advantage for the people we are seeking to lead to Christ. It is a process of developing meaningful and genuine relationships with other people through which we allow the gospel to first be demonstrated in our lives and then our words of exhortation and encouragement.

As the name implies, through *Relationship Evangelism* we 'build bridges' (develop relationships) with people which allow the gospel to flow freely and naturally. *Relationship Evangelism* involves the gradual development of relationships with those who do not know Jesus. The development of these relationships will involve several progressive levels or steps. Developing true relationships is a seamless and natural process which cannot really be formularised. However there is a progression in the process which can be unpacked and understood. It's not a formula to follow, it is a process to understand and be guided by as we build the relationship and bridge the gap. There are eight stages which can be identified and I will be cover these in more detail later in this teaching series.

1. The initial contact
2. Becoming better acquainted
3. Being a servant
4. Being a friend
5. Sharing your faith
6. Witness of the 'Body'
7. Exposure to the gospel
8. The invitation

*Relationship Evangelism* is where we have enough love and concern for those who don't know Jesus that we are willing to make the effort to develop relationships with them so that we can, by both word and example, share the gospel of Christ with them.

### **The Value of Relationship Evangelism**

Now that I've defined what I mean by *Relationship Evangelism*, let me share what I think is the value of this approach. There are three main reasons why this is an area we need to pursue.

*(a) Relationship Evangelism has an effect on our own lives*

As you will see over the coming weeks, *Relationship Evangelism* requires that our spiritual growth and development is strong and intentional. We cannot connect with people at this level and start building relationship bridges over which the Holy Spirit can bring the gospel into their lives, unless our connection with God is strong. It's sad, but true that in other less-organic attempts at evangelism it's possible that we are just giving lip service to the gospel and the message of the kingdom. There are plenty of messed up, insincere Christians involved in evangelistic programs which do not require a personal, accountable relationship.

By contrast, however, to be effective in *Relationship Evangelism* our lives must be an 'open book'. If we are not the genuine article; transparent in every way; if we are not really connecting with God whilst building relationship bridges with the those outside the Church, then those bridges will collapse before the Holy Spirit gets a chance to bring the gospel into their lives. Paul describes this transparency and personal accountability well in his second letter to the Corinthians.

**2 Corinthians 3:2-3** *"You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by everybody. You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts."*

So by adopting this approach to evangelism, it will motivate us to draw closer to God and make us better Christians by forcing us to be accountable and 'real' about our faith and our relationship with God. *Relationship Evangelism* puts Christians 'out there' on the cutting edge of life. We are never like Jesus more than when we are in the thick of life seeking to connect to real people who desperately need a saviour. It transforms us before it even touches them.

*(b) Relationship Evangelism happens in out in the world.*

*Relationship Evangelism* gets us out of the Church building and into the lives of those who need to hear about Jesus; out to where we can truly be 'salt' and 'light.' How useless would salt be if it remained in your cupboard all the time?

Probably about as useless as a Christian who only displays the reality of their relationship with God inside the hallowed halls of a Church building, surrounded by like-minded people! How useless would a torch be if you switched it on in the middle of the day when there was light all around? Probably as useless as a Christian who only switched on their spiritual light when they were in the company of other lights. Jesus said we are the light of the *world* – so that's where our light needs to be shining.

A commitment to *Relationship Evangelism* means that we are out there in the thick of life beyond the confines of our Church fortress, where we can humbly demonstrate a better way of life and reveal the life of Christ within us. Adopting this approach to evangelism can make our neighbourhoods a better place in which to live and improve the moral environment in our workplace. It can literally transform a city! It is amazing what can happen when we simply do what Jesus told us to do; when the salt is taken out of the cupboard and applied where it's needed; when the light is switched on in the darkness where it's needed most – then, and only then, the impact will be profound.

### *(c) Relationship Evangelism works!*

What may have worked well in times past may not work today because of the changing culture around us. It used to be that the majority of Australians had a 'Christian' background. Even though many were not living as committed Christians, a large number of Australians still embraced basic Christian morals and beliefs. In such cases, a simple presentation of the gospel was often all that was needed and being associated with a Church was still an accepted part of our culture for many. It was not uncommon to meet people from all walks of life who attended a Church or Sunday School at some time in their life.

However the culture of the 21st century in this nation is now very different. The majority of people in today's society have a secular background. So they don't hold to basic Christian morals and beliefs. Their worldview is different and so everything has changed. We can no longer assume there is a basic understanding of the Christian message. Apart from a nativity scene at Christmas and a few more crosses displayed at Easter, most people around us know nothing about Christianity. In such cases, a lot of preparation of the 'soil' needs to happen before we even consider planting the 'seed.'

It also used to be that most Christians knew how to easily develop new relationships with other people. Many Christians had close friends or associates who had been exposed to Christian things at one point in their life and were open to at least discussing the Church and God. Research has shown in the last 20 years that Christians are developing those relationships less and less. Later in this series we will look at some of the barriers and obstacles which have contributed to this situation. *Relationship Evangelism* takes these changing conditions into consideration.

In his book, *Why Churches Grow*, Flavil Yeakley made a number of important observations about Church growth based upon his detailed study of growing and dying churches:

*"... The data presented ... strongly supports the idea that establishment of a pattern of friendship is an important part of the conversion process." (p. 64)*

*"... the Christ who lives in the heart of the individual members of that congregation is formed in the heart of the new convert. A personal relationship is essential in the process." (p. 53)*

*"This data suggests that when subjects formed personal relationships with members of the congregation, they were more likely to remain faithful. When they did not form such personal relationships, they were more likely to drop out of the church." (p.54)*

Yeakley is not the only one to conduct such research, there are hundreds of studies which have been done in many different countries and cultures and they all conclude that when a personal relationship is the vehicle to presenting the gospel and connecting people to the Church, two things are true:

- (a) The person is more likely to accept Christ
- (b) The person is more likely to remain walking in Christ

This can be seen very clearly in the results of a survey done by *The Institute For Church Growth*. They asked over 10,000 Christians this question: "What was responsible for your coming to Christ and this Church?" The results of this study are fascinating:

- 1% 'I visited there'
- 1% 'I visited there'
- 1% 'I attended a gospel meeting'
- 2% 'I had a special need'
- 3% 'I just walked in'
- 3% 'I liked the programs'
- 5% 'I liked the teaching'
- 6% 'I liked the Pastor'
- 79% 'A friend or relative invited me'**

Almost 80% of people indicated that relationships were the primary vehicle which brought them into the Kingdom. Now I'm not suggesting that *Relationship Evangelism* is the *only* way to reach people for God. Many souls have been brought to Christ through crusades and less direct approaches.

Thousands are finding faith today through the internet. Every day there are new evangelistic websites popping up which present the gospel in multimedia format and people are responding. So we need to allow room for many methods and approaches. We also need to make room for those who are not as gifted in these areas and are less inclined to share their faith through relationships.

However we cannot get away from the simple fact that the vast majority of people will come to Jesus through a relationship with one of His disciples and the primary reason people drift from Churches is because of a lack of quality relationships. So whilst it may not be the only way to advance the Kingdom of God, clearly it is by far the most effective way and should therefore be given a high priority.

*Relationship Evangelism* demands our attention and when we look at what the Great Commission really says, then this study is even more important! We are exhorted to go and 'make disciples' .. not go and convert people and leave them to their own devices.

Many evangelistic programs seem to produce converts but if we were to check on the status of those new converts 12 months later, we would find out how many 'converts' actually became 'disciples' and truly embraced the mission of Christ as their own. Some of the studies done in this area are really quite alarming.

From one Billy Graham crusade in the 1980's, researchers discovered that less than 35% of the new converts from that crusade were actively involved in a Church just a year later. Now we should praise God for the 35% - but what happened to all the others? Why such a high dropout rate? Relationships (or lack thereof) is the answer most of the time.

Trying to make disciples today without forming strong relationships is like trying to drive a car without a motor. Maybe you can improvise and cut a hole in the floor and drive it like Fred Flintstone, but a car without a motor is eventually going to cause burnout in the driver. You will lose the joy really fast!

Trying to make disciples without forming relationships will bring the same result and that is why millions of Christians are not involved in any kind of outreach or evangelism. Their car has no motor!

So let me wrap this up for now by way of summary:

*Relationship Evangelism ...*

- takes into consideration some of the forces which hinder our effectiveness in evangelism
- makes us better Christians in the process of trying to influence those outside the Church
- is an easy, natural, less confrontational way to share the gospel with others
- is more likely to be successful in leading people to Christ and keeping them faithful to the Lord!
- is the means by which the vast majority of people actually come to faith in Christ.

In the weeks ahead we will look at some of the obstacles and pitfalls associated with *Relationship Evangelism* and we will be getting very practical - there may even be homework, so be warned. I pray that we will embrace this teaching and this concept with renewed commitment as we seek to advance the Kingdom of God, by His grace – for His glory!

## BRIDGING THE GAP – Part 2

### *'Firming the Foundation'*

by Rev. Robert Griffith

As we were reminded last week, studies have shown that about 80% of people who have come to faith in Christ in the last decade or two have done so through a relationship with another Christian. Crusades, gospel rallies, the internet and other less personal approaches are still being blessed by God and He will bring people into His kingdom via whatever vehicles we provide! However, it is abundantly clear that the primary vehicle for bringing people into the kingdom of God is relationships.

This should be no surprise to us because the Church is a family, not a club and so relationships are at that heart of all that we are and all that we do. So it makes sense then to be committed to building relationship bridges with people outside the Church, over which the Holy Spirit will, in time, bring the gospel into their hearts. In this teaching series we are going to look at some of the practical nitty gritty of bridge-building and gospel-sharing. However, before we commence that examination, I want to address again something which is foundational to this whole process: *discipleship*.

It's assumed and widely accepted that in order to '*.. go and make disciples ...*' we need to be disciples ourselves. That's so obvious it hardly seems necessary to even mention it. But I've learned over the years that we can miss some of the most obvious and simple truths. So I need to stress again the importance of discipleship as an essential prerequisite and foundation to evangelism. *You have to be a disciple before you can make disciples.*

That statement sounds simple but there's a lot to understand here. We especially need to know the difference between *converts* and *disciples*. A convert is someone who has accepted the truth that Jesus is their Lord and Saviour and have accepted His free gift of salvation. Converts are hopefully 'disciples in the making,' but they have a personal discipleship journey to embark upon before they become disciple-makers themselves. You can become a Christian with one choice. You become a disciple over time and it involves hundreds of choices.

Have you ever wondered why Jesus waited three years to issue the Great Commission and head home? He could have outlined the essence of the gospel and God's plans for the kingdom in a couple of weeks. Why did He wait three years? I think I could summarise all of Jesus' teaching and run you through an 'Intro to Christianity' seminar in one day! I guarantee that at the end of that day, you would have all the knowledge you need about being a Christian.

So why did Jesus take three years? Why didn't He issue the Great Commission after two years ... or one year .. or six months .. or six weeks? What was He doing all that time? You know the answer. He was turning *converts* into *disciples*. It takes much more than one choice and some knowledge be an equipped disciple of Jesus Christ. It involves time, relationships and hundreds of choices before you are prepared as a disciple and can respond to the Great Commission and start advancing the Kingdom of God.

Jesus, the greatest discipleship trainer ever to walk this earth, worked with only twelve people, seven days a week, for three years. He walked with them, talked with them, ate with them, slept with them, laughed and cried with them. Just ponder how many hours that involved. He did all that before those rookies were at a place where they were ready to carry on His mission of disciple-making. They had to go through the training. They had to be ready and willing. They had to learn about submission and obedience and being a servant of God and His people. They had to rub shoulders with Jesus on-the-job long enough for them to embrace His compassion and His attitude to sacrifice and giving. They had to learn to trust His word. They had to be trained by Jesus before they could become disciple-makers.

We need to understand that the most essential prerequisite and foundation for *relationship evangelism* is a real and personal relationship with Jesus on the part of the disciple-maker. We don't need those who may have made an intellectual decision to accept the teachings of a dead religious guru from a former time and place – we need those whose have walked with the living, present Jesus, talked with Jesus, laughed and cried with Jesus, tried and failed and tried again and learned some hard lessons and what it takes to advance the Kingdom of God in a hostile world. That's what discipleship looks like. Embracing the mission of Christ will remain a dream and nothing else for those who refuse to submit to Jesus' school of discipleship.

Understanding discipleship is to Christians, what understanding the internal combustion engine is to a motor vehicle mechanic! It is basic; foundational; essential; non-negotiable and it never goes out of date and is never irrelevant to every single Christian in this world!

As far as it being relevant to our journey here and now, if you examine my teaching over the last few years, you will see that discipleship and evangelism are the final frontier in our equipping journey as we now press on and take hold of all that God is calling us to be and to do. I've certainly touched on these things before, especially discipleship. But now we get to apply the teaching and accept that discipleship and evangelism are most probably the key issues facing the Church at this time.

In my opinion, nobody can justifiably say that this is not for them at this point in their journey - it is for all of us, right now. Even more than that, I sincerely believe it is God's Word, God's timing and God's equipping program as He prepares us to fulfil our purpose as a Church. We also need to acknowledge that there's no point having a burden for evangelism if we don't have a underlying commitment to discipleship and growing in Christ. They go hand in hand. That is why this series has been preceded by several months of discipleship teaching in *Growing in Christ*.

If you want to be fully prepared to embrace this teaching on evangelism, then I would really encourage you to go back and review the 18 sermons in the last series. That was all intentional preparation for what we will face in the weeks ahead. It's your choice. In fact, in the final analysis, it all comes down to personal choice based on personal commitment and desire. Are we prepared to embrace the journey of discipleship with determination and conviction, ready to face anything that comes our way, confident that whatever lies before us is under the total control of our Sovereign Lord? Are we prepared to grow and mature in Christ, to digest the real meat of discipleship? Are we ready to follow Him, anywhere and everywhere He leads? If the answer is no, then any talk about evangelism is futile, if not dangerous. If the answer is yes, then let's take this journey together.

That leads me to my next observation which may be a little confronting. As I began talking about evangelism last week, I wonder how many of you groaned a little deep inside? It's the same groan that occurs within millions of sincere Christians across the world when anyone dares to talk about their personal responsibility in advancing the Kingdom of God and saving the lost. I don't believe, for the most part, that this is an indication that people are against evangelism or don't believe it needs to happen. I think most people agree that evangelism is really important to the Church.

However, depending on how it is preached, there guilt and a sense of failure can creep over many people and so they don't really welcome the message and often they are unable to hear what is really being said. Satan is responsible for that guilt and shame - not God. The conviction of God may be heavy at times and very challenging, but it always brings hope and comes with God's encouragement and a sense of conviction and empowering that God is going to achieve His purpose in us and through us. So let me just make this one point very clear regarding this and all other sermons I ever preach: if, when I am preaching, you feel a sense of shame or guilt or the feeling that you are not measuring up or don't quite make the grade, just be very clear about one thing: that is NOT God!

God does not use guilt or shame to motivate His people. Those are the tools of the devil and we need to learn to recognise them better and know when to reject those lying thoughts and accusations from Satan! God will never use guilt or shame to motivate us to do anything. All guilt, all shame for all sin, for all time fell on His own dear Son a very long time ago and crushed Him to death, so that we might never have to carry it again. But all too often we choose to carry it and Satan has a party at our expense. We need to let that go.

Now with guilt and shame out of the way, there is still a chance that you will feel a sense of inadequacy when it comes to evangelism. You could have the world's best preacher teach you about evangelism and it still doesn't do it for you! It still doesn't bring desire and conviction. Herein lies a very important observation. Do you remember I stressed at the beginning of this sermon that you have to be a disciple before you can make disciples? Well I want to take that even further and say that *you have to be a disciple before you even feel like making disciples!*

If you were finding it hard to get really excited last week about what's coming in this teaching series; if your heart didn't skip a beat with excitement and expectation of what will unfold over the coming months; if you didn't find the issue of evangelism particularly riveting, then I want to suggest that you dive back into the last series again and don't come out until a burden for the lost has gripped your heart so hard that you can't sleep thinking about those around you who do not know Jesus yet.

Let me cut right to the chase. Do you want to know why the vast majority of believers are not connected to or involved in some evangelistic ministry? Do you really want to know? It's not complicated. They are not engaged in evangelism because they don't want to be! Argue with me if you like but it will be futile because I know I'm right. Let me say it again just in case you missed it the first time - the reason why the vast majority of believers are not connected to or involved in some evangelistic ministry, is because they don't want to be. That's helpful revelation No.1

Now do you want to know why they don't want to be involved? That's simple too - they don't want to be involved because it just isn't important to them. That's helpful revelation No. 2. Shall we keep going for the most helpful revelation of all? Why not! The reason why evangelism is just not important to so many people is because their discipleship training has not yet done its job. One of the most obvious characteristics of a genuine, born-again, Spirit-led true disciple of Jesus Christ is they carry with them every day of their lives, a deep burden for the lost.

You cannot manufacture a genuine burden for the lost. You cannot fake it 'till you make it. Such a burden comes from God as we become disciples and disciple-makers. Just like those first disciples, the more we hang around with Jesus, then the more we share His heart, His passions, His priorities and that includes Jesus' deep burden for the lost children of God. This burden doesn't come out of the blue one day in some epiphany. Very few people wake up one morning with a crushing burden for the lost or have it imparted to them in a ministry time. The vast majority of us catch that burden like the early disciples did, by hanging around with Jesus day in and day out, being taught by Him, trained by Him, mentored by Him and released into ministry by Him.

Jesus took three years to do that because He needed three years before the burden of His heart and the passion which drove Him all the way to Calvary was 'caught by' or 'imparted to' His followers. It doesn't happen overnight! It comes over time as we face the various tests and trials associated with growth and maturity as a disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ. So if you don't feel a particular burden for the lost; if you find it hard to get really motivated or excited about evangelism; if you are not sitting on the edge of your seat waiting for the next instalment in the 'how to reach the lost' program, then don't feel bad; don't feel guilty; don't beat yourself up and wonder what's wrong. That would be silly because you already know how to fix that - you just need to hang around Jesus more and be better equipped as His disciple.

Like His first disciples, maybe you were sleeping under a tree when Jesus taught about submission. Or you were off chasing a meal when Jesus was talking about servanthood. Perhaps you had another commitment the day He was teaching about compassion. Or you were playing sport when others were hearing about sacrifice. Like it not, a desire and passion to advance the Kingdom of God is not a particular spiritual gift given to some and not to others - this is God's heart - and we are ALL meant to share it. It's the very reason this earth keeps spinning in space. It is the whole reason why God has not wound up life as we know it.

Advancing the Kingdom of God, by His grace and for His glory is our very purpose in living. It defines our existence on earth. All the other trimmings of life are just that - trimmings, peripheral to the main purpose we are here. If that purpose does not fan into flame a passion deep in your soul and cause you to re-organise your whole life and priorities around that one goal in life, then I have some great news for you - the best part of your life is yet to come and you are in for a treat!

When the Spirit of God grips your heart and lights the same fire in you as He did in Jesus, in Paul, in Martin Luther, in Billy Graham and in the many millions of sold-out-for-Jesus disciples who have lived on this earth, then you will experience life as it was always meant to be and what you are experiencing now, won't even compare to what is to come.

That same passion and drive and sense of purpose and calling can be ours. We just need to re-enrol in Jesus' discipleship course and stick with it until we are ready for our Lord to look us in the eye, with confidence, as one whom He has personally trained, as we hear Him say, "*Now, go and make disciples, teaching them everything that I have taught you.*" What has He taught us? He has taught us how to live as His disciple and we can now teach that to others the same way we learned it: on the job, day by day in relationship with Jesus and His other disciples.

So in this teaching series I'll be giving you some practical tips every Sunday about *Relationship Evangelism* but during the week I want to encourage you to download the sermon manuscript and grab a pen and spend that week working through it again, asking God to speak directly to you in a way you can understand and embrace personally. If you want this study in *Relationship Evangelism* to bear any fruit at all, then you need to wrestle with the teaching and find God's word for you.

My hope and prayer is that God will use this series as a tool to connect or re-connect us all with Jesus as He tests us, trains us and confronts with issues we need to deal with in our discipleship journey with Him. If that is your commitment then this teaching can change your life. This teaching can transform your family, your Church, your city and your nation. The same dynamite that exploded under those early disciples and resulted in the gospel spreading like a raging bushfire throughout all of Asia Minor 2,000 years ago is the exact same spiritual dynamite we will encounter in this teaching.

However, as is always the case, it's our choice whether we light that fuse or bury that dynamite and ignore it. I can assure you that if you choose to light the fuse; if you choose to make an effort to submit to the Holy Spirit as He leads us through this teaching, your life will never be the same again; your family will never be the same again; your Church will never be the same again and your community might get to see the transforming river of God's grace flow through it before leave this planet.

How then shall you live? What choices will you now make today and tomorrow in light of what you have heard? I hope your first choice will be to download this sermon and read it a few more times and discern what God is saying directly to you. Then any other choices you need to make will become clear as God speaks to you and prepares you for the journey ahead. May it be so, Lord!

## BRIDGING THE GAP – Part 3

### *'Barriers to Evangelism'*

by Rev. Robert Griffith

I want you to imagine a conversation between Jesus and the archangel Gabriel just after Jesus ascended to heaven. Gabriel approached Jesus and said,

*"Master, you must have suffered terribly for mankind down there."*

*"I have,"* Jesus said.

*"And ..."* continued Gabriel, *"do they all know about how much You loved them and saved them and made it possible for them to live with you forever?"*

*"Oh, no,"* said Jesus, *"not yet, only a handful of people in Palestine know."*

Gabriel was perplexed. *"Then what have you done to make sure that everyone knows about Your love for them?"*

Jesus said, *"I've asked Peter, James, John and a few more friends to wait for the Holy Spirit to empower them and then go and tell others about Me. Those who are told will in turn tell others and My story will be spread to the farthest reaches of the earth. Ultimately, all of mankind will have heard about My life and what I have done for them."*

Gabriel frowned and looked rather sceptical. He knew only too well what poor stuff humans were made of. *"But what if Peter, James and John grow weary? What if the people who come after them forget? What if two thousand years from now, people are no longer telling others about You? Please tell me you have another plan."*

Jesus answered, *"I have no other plan. I'm counting on them."*

Twenty centuries later, Jesus still has no other plan. He was counting on His early disciples and they delivered. He is still counting on His disciples today – that's you and me. So how are we going? Well before we succumb to another guilt trip, I want us to consider some reasons why we may appear ineffective in evangelism when compared to the early disciples. My purpose here is not to offer excuses for us to hide behind, but rather make some observations of the things which can seriously hinder our effectiveness, things from within and without, things which we can overcome if we have the desire.

### **1. Too many people ...**

We live in a world where most of us come face to face with more people than we can easily relate to. A casual stroll down the street or through a store brings us face to face with dozens of people every minute. Every day most of us come in contact with far more people than we would ever form relationships with in any meaningful way.

This fact alone can easily cripple our ability to relate to anyone. Since we cannot possibly make quality connections with everyone we encounter, we may be tempted to relate to no one. Before long, we begin to adopt an attitude of isolation and eventually, we lose the ability to effectively carry on meaningful relationships outside the Church.

This will obviously have an adverse effect on evangelism because a meaningful relationship is by far the most successful vehicle for the gospel (which is the essence of this teaching series). However, many Christians just don't have any significant interaction with people outside the Church and are therefore not able to make the necessary connections. We need to overcome this barrier and we will look at ways to do that in the coming weeks.

## 2. Life is too fast and complicated ...

Despite inventions which save us heaps of time, we seem to be busier than ever before! The pace of life is breathtaking at times. Jobs change; people move; congestion grows; traffic jams; our phones ring constantly; the TV drones on and on; we are held captive by schedules and the demands of others and the many distractions of modern life. We soon find ourselves unable to slow our world down.

Living like this can convince us that there is simply no room to add 'another task' even if it's as noble and important as evangelism. We might feel that to add one more responsibility may even be 'the straw that breaks the camel's back'. So evangelism of any sort may miss our agenda completely.

## 3. Exposure to limited evangelism models ...

Even when we do feel motivated to do something, we are often given only limited options such as just inviting people to Church services; going around the neighbourhood knocking on the doors of complete strangers; or leading *Christianity Explained* or *Alpha* meetings.

I am not devaluing any of those methods, but clearly they are not being utilised by the majority of Christians. Those not suited for these approaches can get easily discouraged as they try and try, only to find themselves failing to be something they are not. So unless they find some other way, many just quit making any effort to share the gospel and lead people to Christ.

## 4. Misunderstanding of 'separation' ...

Many Christians misunderstand the principle of separation. We are meant to be 'separate' from the world (see 2 Cor. 6:14-18), but this kind of separation does not equate to 'isolation' (1 Cor. 5:9-13). Yet I fear that many Christians tend to deliberately isolate themselves from the world in the name of 'separation'. There is a way to influence people without adopting their values or lifestyle. Remember the principle of being 'salt'? Salt must get out of the container and mix with food to be effective. Without engaging in sin, we can still connect with a sinful world. Jesus and Paul showed us how:

**Matthew 9:10-13; 11:19** *While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and "sinners" came and ate with him and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and 'sinners'?" On hearing this, Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners." ... The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and "sinners."' But wisdom is proved right by her actions."*

**1 Corinthians 9:20-23** *To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.*

## 5. The credibility gap ...

In some cases there is an imbalance between the 'verbalisation' and the 'incarnation' of the Gospel. By that I mean that the lifestyle of the Christian is inconsistent with the message being presented. When this happens, people are likely to think: "What you **are** speaks so loudly, I can't hear what you are **saying**." When this happens a credibility gap is formed.

To overcome this gap, Christians must BE good news before they can SHARE good news. That is, we must be sure to live out the gospel in our lives before preaching it to others. (See Ezra 7:10; 1 Peter 3:1-2). To put it another way, when love is seen, the message is heard. Conversely, when love is not seen, the message is not taken seriously. American Author and close friend of C.S. Lewis, Sheldon Vanauken, put it this way:

*"The best argument for Christianity is Christians; their joy, their certainty, their completeness. But the strongest argument against Christianity is also Christians - when they are sombre and joyless, when they are self-righteous, smug and complacent, when they are narrow and repressive, then Christianity dies a thousand deaths."*

So there are five of the forces which hinder our ability to engage in *relationship evangelism*. But now I want to get more personal and look at five more attitudes or weaknesses within our own hearts and lives which can work against us showing any interest in or commitment to evangelism. These are certainly not the only barriers, but they are the main ones from my experience.

## **6. Apathy and indifference ...**

The curse of our age is: *"I don't care."* Whilst very few of us would ever admit it, by our actions we can manifest this attitude to a lot of things in life – particularly evangelism. There is an *'I'm alright Jack'* approach to life which can be seen in the workplace, on the roads, in the Church and in society generally. As long we have what we need, we tend not to be concerned about those who are yet to have *their* needs met. Whether it's the starving children in the TV advertisements; the lady at work you saw in tears the other day; the homeless person you walked around down town; the ministry of our Church or the unsaved thousands around us each day - there is a growing disease of indifference spreading through our communities.

The only known cure for this problem is to replace indifference with action. It is not a difficult disease to cure but it seems very difficult for most of us to accept the diagnosis in the first place! If you refuse to admit you have a disease, it will never be cured.

## **7. Fear and anxiety ...**

There are many people who are not apathetic towards those who do not know Jesus. They genuinely care and want to reach them. However their problem is fear. Fear can come in many forms and prevent us from fulfilling our calling in a many areas. It paralyses us and renders us ineffective. Our rational mind can tell us that there is nothing to fear about evangelism. In our nation at present it is not a life-threatening task. The worst that people can do is ignore you or ridicule your faith, but that is all. Fear may be unwarranted, but it can still cripple us. People can be afraid of what others think of them. They can be afraid of ruining a relationship by sharing Jesus. They may be afraid of losing their job if the boss thinks they are trying to convert people. They may be afraid that they will get it wrong or mislead people or not say it the right way.

The only cure for fear is to draw nearer to God and allow His love to cast it out. God has never asked us to convert people or change them or do anything beyond our ability. He just wants us to tell our story, which is really His story. There's nothing to fear. God will take our lives and our words and use them for His Kingdom purposes. He calls us to be real and live like we are glad to know Jesus and not like we are ashamed of Him. God will do the rest.

People have testified to the amazing things God has done when they finally relaxed and let go of the responsibility for bringing people into the Kingdom - that was never our job in the first place! Our job is much simpler: live and talk in such a way that people can see, hear and encounter Jesus through our life. Fear can cripple us, but we can and we must overcome it.

## 8. 'Not my job' syndrome ...

One common reason why many Christians fail to commit to any form of evangelistic ministry is because they believe it is someone else's responsibility. They have been taught to think that the Pastor will do it or an Evangelist or some other gifted and qualified person. It's true that some people are more gifted and called to evangelistic ministry. However to even suggest that we are not all called to witness and share our faith in deed and word is preposterous. People must be reading a different Bible (or not reading it at all) to come to such a conclusion.

There are certain tasks within the Church which are not the responsibility of all people and God gifts individuals accordingly. However, every last one of us are called to be 'salt' and 'light' in a needy world. The degree to which we engage in evangelism may vary to others, but there is absolutely no room for the view that some of us may be called to show Jesus to the world around us and some of us are called to something else. In essence, there is no 'something else' - because it's all about Jesus!

## 9. Relationship dysfunction ...

It's a real challenge for many of us to form meaningful relationships with people outside the Church, however it is near impossible for those whose current relationships are in tatters. Sadly, there are many people in the Church who have difficulty in forming and maintaining any kind of relationship – even among like-minded friends. To expect such people to form relationships with strangers outside the Church is unreasonable.

Some of these relationship tensions are the result of poor attitudes and in such cases sin just needs to be dealt with and reconciliation sought. However, other issues are more complicated and some people will need to seek some help from experienced Christian counsellors. It is neither fair nor wise to encourage people to pursue new relationships when their current ones are struggling or failing. Once they get help and deal with the issues or behaviour patterns which led to the tensions, they will find it so much easier to build quality relationships with others.

## 10. A stranger to Jesus ...

I touched on this last week and it really needs to be understood clearly. One of the greatest reasons why Christians find it hard to commit to any evangelistic ministry is because their own connection to Jesus is flimsy at best. The whole thrust and essence of *relationship evangelism* is "Let me introduce you to my Friend." For many believers, that is simply not possible because they have not been discipled well and they do not have a relationship of intimacy with Jesus. They relate to Him through the Bible and through Church activities and through music and other people but not directly or personally.

If Jesus is not real; if He is not walking with you and talking with you and sharing your daily life and experience, then you have nothing but shallow words to offer anyone else. Without a living, moment by moment, dynamic relationship with the risen Lord Jesus, we have no testimony and nothing to share with anyone!

People don't want our Bible knowledge. People don't want Church doctrine. People don't want a morality lesson. People don't want a list of things to do and not do. Some of those things may interest them later as they mature in Christ, but not initially. First and foremost they need a real encounter with a living God and there is no way you can help that happen for them unless you have had, and are having, a real, daily encounter with God yourself.

That is why in my last sermon I stressed the fundamental importance of discipleship as an essential pre-requisite and foundation to *relationship evangelism*. If you are not personally encountering the Lord Jesus on a day-to-day basis then you will have nothing to say to those who need Him - absolutely nothing. Anything you attempt to say will be shallow, hollow and the product of an insincere life which lacks integrity.

People don't want religion, they want Jesus. They *need* Jesus and unless you have Jesus then don't even try to form a relationship with them yet because you have nothing to give them but shallow words about a person whom you don't really know personally.

So there are ten of the main barriers I can see which prevent us from committing to the advancement of the kingdom of God. Whether they are pressures from outside or attitudes within our own heart, we have control over each and every one of them. They are only barriers because we allow them to be barriers.

I guarantee that if you download this sermon and sit down this week with God and ask Him to reveal those things which have your name on them and then let Him empower you to make different choices from now on, you will see amazing things happen in your life and in time, wonderful opportunities will open up for you to lead others towards Jesus. If God reveals all ten as problems for you - that's OK – just tackle them one at a time and let God help you overcome each one.

There are thousands of people out there who are desperately waiting for us to show them the way and if we don't do it, no one else will. God does not have a 'Plan B' if the Church fails to do our job! If you have any desire whatsoever to fulfil your primary purpose on this planet, then this is where it starts, by being honest about those issues and attitudes which hinder you from being the person God called you to be. If you tackle them one by one, with faith and determination, God will take you through them and empower you to be all He called you to be.

How then shall we live? By His grace and for His glory. Amen.

## BRIDGING THE GAP – Part 4

*‘Focus, Focus, Focus’*

by Rev. Robert Griffith

We’ve been talking about *Relationship Evangelism* as a vehicle for reaching the lost and advancing the Kingdom of God. As I’ve indicated before, this is the primary means by which God is bringing His children home. More than three quarters of those who come to faith in Christ, report that they became part of the Church through a personal relationship with a disciple of Jesus.

We all agree that we live in difficult times and that our city and nation desperately need a revelation of the love and grace of God. We need to see righteousness re-established in our nation. The glory of God needs to flood this great southland. But how is that going to happen? Let me first suggest how it will *not* happen. In my opinion it will not happen by running evangelistic rallies and events. God will use any ministry in His name, but the Kingdom is no longer advancing at any significant pace in this nation through mass rallies and events like it may have in the past.

It will also not happen by building more mega-churches. In the corporate sector we have small business operators being forced into bankruptcy every day by multi-national corporations. Department stores and national chains are getting bigger and multiplying while smaller specialty shops with personal service are rapidly disappearing.

Well the same thing is happening in the Church. Bigger is seen as better and so we see mega-churches emerging with huge budgets and all the resources imaginable. But most of their growth in the last two decades is the result of people coming from other Churches. Like a giant leech they drain the life from all Churches in their area and do very little, proportionally, to advance the Kingdom of God. Mega-churches will not bring this nation back to God. They will simply become targets for the media and will continue to attract criticism from inside and outside the Church. A number of mega-churches have literally imploded recently and disappeared. In fact a serious mega-church drama is playing out right now in New Zealand with *Arise* – the largest Church in the nation. It is so tragic to watch.

As radical and bold as it may sound, I would like to suggest that the established Church as an institution, as a separated minority group within society, cannot and will not be successful in bringing this nation back to God. Let me explain what I mean. If I was able to ask all those people outside the Church in our nation to describe the Christian Church, what would they say? Well, many would talk about buildings, but once we moved beyond that, the vast majority would talk about those people in their community who separate themselves into various groups and meet together in special buildings on special days to worship, pray, study the Bible and do whatever it is that Christians do when they are together. Now that sounds like a reasonable description.

Let me say it again, however, that what those people see as the Church is not what God is going to use to bring this nation back to Himself. There is nothing wrong with Christians gathering together to do all that, in fact it is important for our health and growth. However if that is all we do; if feeding the flock and worshipping God in designated sanctuaries, at arm’s length to those who need Him most; if that is our primary purpose and activity, then our impact in this nation will be (and in fact is) negligible.

**That’s because individuals cannot relate to groups or institutions – they can only relate to individuals.**

If our times together are not preparing us in such a way that we can go back into the places God has ordained for us in the community and ‘be Jesus’ in the marketplace of life, then our times together are of questionable worth to Jesus and the advancement of His Kingdom. God has deployed us in ministry already - every single one of us. We each have a circle of influence. For some that may be potentially thousands of people each week – for others maybe only a handful, but we are already in the mission field. We don’t need to “go into all the world ...” because we are already there - every single day.

All we need is to be equipped and encouraged to bloom where we are planted and make a difference. Ok then, with all that in mind, let's continue this journey. Up to this point in this teaching series, we have been dealing with the preliminaries of *Relationship Evangelism*.

Today I want us to begin looking at some of the practical 'how to' measures. One of the first steps to successful evangelism is to make sure you have a clearly defined target. If you don't know where you are aiming then you will rarely hit anything! So I want to suggest that if you are serious about making a difference in this nation then you need to prepare and maintain what I will call a 'Focus List'.

What is a Focus List? Well it's a list you focus on! Nothing complicated there. Specifically, it is a list of five people in your circle of influence whom you would like to see come to faith in Christ. This is a list which you keep in some prominent place where you see it every day and pray for them every day. Some won't even need a physical list, we can all remember five names without writing them down.

Now I am sure you have lots more than five people in your circle of influence whom you would love to see come to Christ. However, we cannot really focus on too many people at one time. So I want to encourage you to ask God to bring just five people into focus for you at this point in your journey and theirs. These will be the five people you focus on and our focus list is a really important key to leading people to Christ. We must keep them constantly on our minds and in our prayers. (See Romans 10:1).

Consistent success in any venture depends upon two things:

- Setting goals (which gives you direction)
- Keeping those goals constantly before you (which provides motivation to your actions)

Setting goals gives DIRECTION. Keeping those goals constantly before you gives you MOTIVATION. Having a Focus List is a very helpful tool in this process. By having five specific names we are able to concentrate our attention and our prayers where they are needed most. By referring to that list every day and praying for those people every day, we are constantly reminded of our goal to reach these people for Christ. Before we intentionally start to build relationships with these people we need to be praying for them every day.

### **Suggestions for setting up your Focus List**

a) *Pray for wisdom (James 1:5)*

Once we start listing all the people in our circle of influence, it will be evident that to work effectively the list needs to be narrowed down. So wisdom (which can be sought through prayer) will be essential determining which five people God's Spirit has prepared at this point in their journey. Only God knows the people who may be open to establishing a meaningful relationship with you at this point in time. Seek His counsel when fine-tuning your list.

b) *List the names of all the non-Christian contacts you can think of in your wider circle of influence.*

Not just the people you already know – but everyone with whom you could develop a relationship if the Lord so leads. Your list may include visitors at services; spouses of Church members, new residents in your community; relatives or friends who live close by; your own neighbours, co-workers, people you connect with in other community groups.

Initially, concentrate on just developing the list. Add names to the list over a period of time as they come to mind. If you have trouble coming up with any names, don't be discouraged, it has become too easy for some of us to be isolated in our own little world. In future sermons I will be suggesting ways to make initial contacts so your list may be easier to prepare.

*c) Prioritise your list.*

Some guidelines for determining priority:

- Those you believe are closest to being open to the gospel
- Those with whom you already have open communication
- Those who may have shown some spiritual interest
- Those whose respect and friendship you have gained
- Those for whom you have been praying regularly already
- Those you may have a limited time to reach
- Those who have a Christian spouse
- Those in whom others have already invested some 'sowing' and 'watering' time
- Those who seem to repeatedly come across your path (is it coincidence, or is it God?)
- Those for whom you have the greatest burden when you pray

Narrow your list down to ten people and then ask God to help you narrow that down to five people which will be your Focus List for now.

*d) Begin praying for these five people intentionally every single day ...*

- Asking God for OPPORTUNITY to be of service to these people (1 Cor. 3:5-7; Col. 4:3)
- Asking God for WISDOM to make the most of the opportunities you have (Col.4:4-6)
- Asking God for BOLDNESS to share the gospel when the right time comes. (Eph. 6:18-20)

Developing a Focus List can be a major step to being successful in reaching others for Christ. As with so many areas of life, the reason many individuals fail to achieve their goals in life is because THEY NEVER SET THEM IN THE FIRST PLACE. If our goal in life is to see people come to Christ, then a Focus List can help to define our goals and keep them ever before us.

In the next sermon I will expand on this concept and offer suggestions on how to develop meaningful relationships with those outside the Church. But if you have time between now and the next week, then get started! Sort out your list and start praying in a focused way every day for five people.

Even if you never do anything other than pray intentionally for five unbelievers every day - that in itself will see us turn the corner towards advancing the Kingdom of God in this city and this nation. I believe we will end up doing far more than that, but exercising the discipline to focus on five people in prayer in this way is a huge step towards bringing this nation back to God. While you are praying for your five people, spare a prayer for those around you who are doing the same. Encourage one another.

Each one of us has a different circle of influence and so there will be great diversity in our Focus Lists. Some will be praying for the housewife next door, the man who delivers the mail or the lady who serves you at the Post Office. Some will be praying for business and community leaders; others may have school teachers and doctors on their list.

We need to pray for and long for the day when the people of God have so engaged with the society around them that people at every level are being prayed for and are on someone's Focus List. Wouldn't it be great if our local, state and federal government leaders were all on someone's list? How will that happen? It will only happen when we put Christians into those governments or the offices of MP's so they can build relationships with those people put them on their Focus List! It really is that simple. Wouldn't it be great if all the leaders of our Schools and Universities were on someone's Focus List, assuming they are not already Christians, as some certainly are.

Wouldn't it be great if that old man you drove past last Saturday night in the park with his flagon of grog was on someone's list? He could be - but only if a disciple of Jesus decided to build a relationship with him. Praying for him as you drive by is a great thing to do but the chances of him finding Jesus if that is all that happens are very slim.

From Prime Ministers to street sweepers and everyone in between our goal should be to see that each and every one of them, at every strata of society, has a Christian somewhere close by, praying for them and building a relationship bridge over which the Holy spirit can move when He is ready.

So Church - let's get to work - let's engage our hearts as the Lord leads us to focus in on just five people from among the hundreds around us every week – just five people with whom we are able to have a relationship if we so choose. This is not a difficult task at all really, if we seek God's wisdom and guidance. God already knows who those five people are. The challenge will come after we have our list, as we seek to discipline ourselves to start praying for these people every day and building those relational bridges for God to use.

God is ready. He is always ready to energise and empower His children right across our nation. The only question which remains is: are we listening for His call and ready to fulfil our purpose in Christ as we advance the Kingdom of God, by His grace - for His glory?

## BRIDGING THE GAP – Part 5

### *'Building Bridges'*

by Rev. Robert Griffith

In our continuing examination of the nature and benefit of *Relationship Evangelism*, we looked last week at the importance of establishing a 'Focus List' and becoming intentional in praying for five people every day with the view to building a relationship bridge over which the Holy Spirit can bring the gospel into their lives.

In this sermon I want to talk about the next essential step which is actually never one step but many steps over time. As we have already established, the key to *Relationship Evangelism* is the building of meaningful relationships through which we can create opportunities to bring Jesus into people's lives. But as pointed out already in this teaching series, there are factors which hinder our effectiveness and these obstacles, if not addressed, can leave us in a situation where we no longer know how to develop meaningful relationships with people who are yet to embrace the saving grace of God.

One major obstacle is that we can actually forget how to make friends with people outside the Church. So we may need some help in this regard and, as with most things, if we are not intentional – it won't happen. Earlier in this series I mentioned the eight stages which we go through in *Relationship Evangelism*. This is not a formula or a check list and some of these things may happen together and others may flow from one to another.

Let me remind you of those eight stages:

1. Initial contact
2. Becoming better acquainted
3. Being a servant
4. Being a friend
5. Sharing our faith
6. Witness of the Body
7. Exposure to the Gospel
8. The invitation

I want to stress again that this is not a clinical checklist we go through with each person on our Focus List and tick off each stage. Building relationships should never be a programmed, technical procedure. However, unless we have a clear understanding of what actually happens and the various essential components of building a relationship, chances are we will never see it through.

So over the next couple of weeks I want us to drill down and look at what should happen instinctively and seamlessly in this process and understanding how that happens will greatly enhance our ability to build those relationships we need to so we can advance the Kingdom of God. The first four stages, which we will look at today, are the bridge-building stages where we establish a relationship which is strong enough to support the introduction of the gospel.

The last four stages are the gospel-sharing stages where we work with God to bring the message of Jesus over that bridge and into the person's life. If the bridge is not strong (stages 1-4), it will break under the weight of the gospel (stages 5-8). In other words, if we do not do a good job in building a sincere relationship of trust with a person, the path for the gospel will not be open and we will struggle to bring this person to Christ.

So in the first part of this journey we are hoping to develop strong relationships. In the second half we are allowing God to use those relationships to bring the message of the gospel into people's lives. We are going to look at the first four stages today and we will look at the last four next week.

The very first stage deals with how we can meet people. This may be where you need to start before you even finalise your Focus List. Of course you may also need to cherry-pick the points I give you now in all the stages because some of them won't apply to you - but they will apply to others.

You may even want to share this teaching with people whose circumstances are very different to yours. Regardless of what place in life you find yourself, there will be things here which you can embrace.

## **Stage 1: Initial Contact**

*Some principles to remember:*

1. Place yourself where people are already - they will not usually come to you. Position yourself in their 'territory' as it were, without compromising your integrity or principles.
2. Be friendly and willing to talk. You will be surprised how many people there are who may respond. (Proverbs 18:24)
3. Take the initiative to meet people and make friends. Don't expect them to. You have a goal and mission which involves them. You need to be intentional. Don't stand in the corner at the party, the office, the playground .. wherever. Take that first step to say hello.
4. Try to leave the person with a favourable impression. Don't be over the top, but don't be sheepish and shy either - just be natural.
5. Be genuine. This relationship is not a 'means to an end'. You're not using this person to notch up another conversion on your evangelism belt! You need to sincerely want to build this relationship. If you do not sincerely and genuinely desire a real relationship with this person ... they will pick that up sooner or later and your best efforts will amount to nothing. Worse than that, you will risk ruining your chances forever with that person. So be real.

*Some suggested activities:*

Around the neighbourhood:

- Be outside when your neighbours are (e.g., doing yard work)
- Have an open house
- Host or attend neighbourhood BBQ's, street parties
- Be involved in school and children's activities (sport, music etc)
- Welcome new neighbours .. be alert, but not nosey.

At work:

- Coffee and lunch breaks
- Doing work projects together
- Business trips, meetings, seminars

There are countless other avenues also through sporting clubs, service clubs and other community activities in you might be involved. There are plenty of opportunities to start developing meaningful relationships.

## **Stage 2: Becoming better acquainted**

*Some principles to remember:*

1. Your goal is to simply get to know the person better.
2. Ask questions about them; e.g., where they are from, where they went to school, interests, family background, etc.
3. Look for common interests.
4. Be patient - don't force the relationship .. there is no time-frame here. Make sure there is movement and progress in the relationship .. but don't rush it.
5. Don't hide your Christianity; let your light shine early in the relationship if the opportunity arises. But don't preach or allow your faith to 'dominate' conversations. If they are interested, they will eventually ask questions or make a comment. If they are not interested at first, don't let them think you have some hidden agenda.
6. Short, frequent contacts seem to be more effective than a few prolonged periods – (Prov. 25:17)
7. Listen for the other person's: desires, fears, aims, goals, burdens, needs, - (Philippians 2:3-4)
8. Be complimentary (in all honesty, of course) – (Acts 26:2-3)

*Some suggested activities:*

Around the neighbourhood ...

- Invite the neighbours in for dessert or a meal
- Games nights
- Recreational activities together
- Shopping
- Watching TV or a movie
- Picnics or barbecues together

At work ...

- Eat lunch together
- Recreational activities together: golf, tennis, card night, walking, etc.
- Continued conversations while working, where appropriate
- Participate in their activities outside of work
- Business trips
- Attend meetings, seminars together
- Car pool
- After work activities

As we become better acquainted, it is important to allow the beauty of the gospel to be seen in our lives. The next two stages in *Relationship Evangelism* makes this possible.

### **Stage 3: Being a servant**

*Some principles to remember:*

1. Expect opportunities for service, and be alert for them
2. Your goal is his / her success in life
3. Love is shown more by deeds than by words (1 John 3:17-18)
4. Meet genuine, practical needs
5. Let them be of service to you as well, and be appreciative

*Some suggested activities:*

Around the neighbourhood ...

- Volunteer to help with kids; e.g., baby-sit, provide transportation
- Take meals over during times of crisis (sickness, death in the family)
- Gardening, mow their lawn now and then if they are away or too busy
- Help them with their home projects
- Help work on their car or computer etc.
- Cards, gifts on special occasions
- Be alert for emergencies
- Ask them to help you (be cautious here)
- Help them move house

At work ...

- Volunteer to help them with their work
- Offer to bring them coffee, mail, etc., if you are passing by
- Be alert for opportunities to be a "sounding board"
- Be alert for domestic needs and offer to help where possible
- Cards, gifts, cake, on special occasions
- Look for opportunities to praise them and their work
- Be willing to take on menial tasks

If we are doing these sort of things with regularity, the next stage will come naturally.

### **Stage 4: Being a friend**

*Some principles to remember:*

1. Work to develop common interests
2. Deepen the relationship: develop openness, honesty, trust, ease in communication
3. Have good times, memorable times, together
4. Acceptance, not reformation, is your primary concern at this stage

*Some suggested activities:*

Around the neighbourhood ...

- Continued conversations over coffee, meals
- Make use of the home - theirs or yours
- Special outings of longer duration
- Consider taking short vacations together
- Extended work projects around the house; e.g., putting up a fence, or painting the house
- Wood gathering trips
- Mutual hobbies
- Recreation, exercise

At work ...

- Overnight trips where there may be extended times to not only work together, but to converse
- Seminars, training together
- Volunteer to team together on projects
- Pursue activities outside of work
- Invite over to your home
- Have dinner together with spouses and families

## **Conclusion**

To this point, the objective has been solely to build a bridge; to develop a meaningful relationship. You will notice that up to this point no effort has been made to actively discuss the gospel or try to lead the person to Christ. Of course God can at times cut right across our progress and open that person's heart to talk to you up front about your faith. When that happens – don't wait. Don't think you can't share your story (testimony) or answer any questions someone might have whenever the opportunity arises. As I have stressed already, this is not a formula or a strict, staged process you have to adhere to - relationship-building is organic and natural or it isn't genuine. So if someone wants you to talk about Church or your faith early in the relationship – go for it.

So by way of summary today, in these first four stages, you have taken some vitally important steps.

- You have made a friend
- Your example of service has hopefully introduced them to a whole lifestyle that is rather unique in our society today
- By your friendliness and your service, the 'soil' of their heart is being prepared for the 'seed'

Next week I will be dealing with the 'planting' of that seed ... or to put it another way, how to 'let the traffic flow' over the bridge we have built. Between now and then, I would encourage you to finalise your Focus List if you can and make some definite plans to do something with some of the suggestions we have looked at today.

As we unpack and examine what is a natural process, just remember that almost 80% of people who have come to faith in the last few decades have done so because a disciple of Jesus took the time to build a relationship with them, earn their trust and share their testimony.

## BRIDGING THE GAP – Part 6

### *'Sharing the Gospel'*

by Rev. Robert Griffith

Up to this point in our study of *Relationship Evangelism*:

- we have identified the various forces that hinder our effectiveness in evangelism
- we have defined *Relationship Evangelism* and considered its value as a method of leading people to Christ
- we have discussed the value of a 'Focus list' and offered suggestions for developing one
- we have offered recommendations for developing meaningful relationships

It was in the last sermon that we examined the four stages of forming substantive relationships, what we called 'building bridges.' These stages are:

1. Making the initial contact
2. Getting better acquainted
3. Being a servant
4. Being a friend

Now in this sermon I want to offer some suggestions on how we might use the 'bridges' we have built to let the gospel flow. That means we use the opportunities provided by our relationships with others to introduce them to the good news of Jesus Christ. There are also four stages in this process as well.

### **5. Sharing Your Faith**

*Some principles to remember:*

- You wish to make a clear identification that you are a Christian in the course of your natural conversations
- Conduct yourself in such a way that people are aware of your faith. (1 Peter 3:15)
- Don't try to say everything at one time.
- Ask questions - seek to understand first, then to be understood.
- Be sensitive to people's reactions; place yourself in their shoes. As you share your faith, always seek wisdom from God through prayer (James 1:5; Nehemiah 2:4)

*Some suggested activities:*

- In daily conversation, interject your beliefs that are based upon God's Word, without getting spiritual or using Christian jargon.
- Don't hesitate to speak of the special benefits and blessings of being a Christian if and when the situation arises.
- When appropriate, give God the glory as you discuss good things that you experience (but avoid excessive praise, for it can sound artificial and hypocritical).

It's important to understand that at this point your purpose is not to convert; rather, you are simply communicating what your faith means to you what Jesus has done for you. There's a lot more I want to say about sharing your faith and so the next two sermons in this series will be devoted to understanding what the Gospel is and the importance of preparing our story, our testimony to share with people in this stage of the process of leading them to Christ. So watch this space!

The next stage will involve introducing your friend to other Christians.

## 6. Witness of the Body

*Some principles to remember:*

- People may at first discount your 'individual' faith and lifestyle, but the 'corporate' example can be a powerful witness and influence (John 13:34-35; 17:20-21).
- At this stage you are wanting to introduce your friend to the love and unity of other Christians.
- As far as possible, connect your friends with Christians who are similar in age, outlook and personality. Do all you can to make it easy to relate to each other.

*Some suggested activities:*

*Around the neighbourhood:*

- Include Christians in your social, recreational and work activities with your non-Christian friends
- Have your friend over for dinner, and invite some Christian friends as well
- Invite your friend to functions of the local Church
- Invite them to fellowship dinners, café Church or other social functions organized by Christians
- Invite them to home Bible studies with a mixture of Christians and non-Christians

*At work:*

- Introduce them to other Christian associates at work
- Invite them to attend weekly Bible studies at places of employment, or with other businessmen outside of work
- Invite them to lunch or dinner where other Christians will be present

Again, the purpose at this stage is not to convert, or to 'gang up' on the prospect, but to simply let them be around other Christians where they can see the faith of others being demonstrated in their lives. Then at last, we come to the point where we get to the most important thing of all: the Gospel.

## 7. Exposure to the Gospel

*Some principles to remember:*

- You want to expose your friend to a full and clear explanation of the Gospel.
- Your goal is not so much to convert, but to create some understanding of the Gospel and its implications. (Note: Lots more will be said in the next two sermons about this).
- With those who are already firm believers in Jesus, but mistaken in their understanding of the gospel... you should not be trying to convert them from 'their Church' to 'your Church,' but rather lead them closer to the Christ they love.
- Like Aquila and Priscilla, you are seeking only to help them learn the way of God more accurately concerning salvation and the Lord's Church (Acts 18:24-26).
- If you do not feel you are capable of teaching what they need, ask someone else to step in and take over

*Some suggested activities:*

- You might appeal to their interest in learning more about the Bible by recommending some basic Bible introduction books.
- Invite them to study with you one of the Gospels, or the book of Acts.
- You might get them enrolled in an *Alpha Course*, or *Christianity Explained* or some other material which presents the basics of the Christian Faith.

At this point, our primary responsibility is to share the Gospel and to make sure the person has a proper understanding of God's love for them and what Christ has done for them. The last stage of involves calling for a response to the Gospel.

## **8. The Invitation**

*Some principles to remember:*

- It is important to actually ask them if they wish to embrace Christ's gift of salvation. Sometimes we never get around to actually asking! While there is a place for persuasion (Acts 2:40), we need to avoid pressuring someone to do something they really don't want to do. If they are not ready, or if the Holy Spirit has not prepared them, any response will be superficial and will bear no long-term fruit. In fact, you could make it harder for them to genuinely accept Jesus later if you try to coerce them too soon.
- Ensure that you continue the relationship even if they say no - some people take longer than others to make the decision. Don't abandon this person and leave them with the impression that your relationship with them was only a means to this end and had no substance of its own. That is horrible and it happens all too often. If you do not genuinely want to relate to this person over the long haul - as a person, not just as a prospect for the Kingdom of God - then don't form the relationship in the first place.
- I am not suggesting you need to best friends with everyone - not at all - but a friendship needs to form and be maintained, regardless of their response to the Gospel. It may take years. What is a human soul worth, after all? How long will you wait?

*Some suggested activities:*

- Approach a person privately after a Bible study or presentation of the gospel and ask them if they have considered responding personally to the gospel.
- The following questions may be helpful after a study:
  - "Does this make sense?"
  - "Is there anything I have said that you do not understand?"
  - "Would you like to respond to Christ and embrace His free gift of salvation?"
- Give them time to make a decision - some people need to study and pray about it for a while.
- Let them know you are always available: any time of the day, any day of the week; when they decide to respond to Christ, you will be glad to assist them. When they are ready to respond, pray with them and ask God to bless them and help them understand what He has been doing in them to bring them to this point.
- Then lead them in a very simple prayer of confession and acceptance. Make it personal and casual ... not like some formula ... perhaps like this:

*“Lord God, I don’t understand all that is happening to me at the moment but I do know that you love me and you sent Jesus to die for me and show me the way. I confess that I need you and cannot reach my full potential without you. I thank you for your forgiveness and love and your promise to restore me to my intended place as your much-loved child. I accept your free gift of salvation in Christ now and ask that your Holy Spirit would make all this real to me as He teaches me, day by day, all I need to know as your disciple. Thank you for your love and grace. Amen.”*

- After they respond to the gospel, follow up with a Bible study designed to help them grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ (2 Peter 3:17-18).
- Get them involved in a nurture group or home group as soon as possible.

## **Conclusion**

*Relationship Evangelism* is really quite simple and the last six sermons could be summed up in this way: *Be a friend - share your story!* Even for those who feel they are unable to preach or teach, *Relationship Evangelism* can be used by anyone to lead others to Christ. Just be a friend and let your faith show by example. When it comes down to the point of explaining the gospel, you may even let another Christian do the actual teaching at Church or through other material you provide.

Many Christians (especially those new in the faith) have led their friends to Christ in this way. Some didn't even know they had because very often people are led towards Christ by one person, but someone else gets the privilege of issuing the invitation and being there when the light comes on in that person's heart. Statistics prove beyond doubt that this is the most effective way to lead others to Christ and we might be surprised to see how many people the Lord will add to our number if all Christians applied themselves to *Relationship Evangelism*.

One last point I want to mention here. For an approach like this to work, it is imperative that Christians constantly encourage one another along the way. In your Home Groups or Bible Studies or just over coffee one day, get together each week and be encouraging to one another as you implement some of the suggestions in these sermons. Help each other set definite goals for things to do each week as they make contacts, build and strengthen relationships and make certain the relationships evolve to the point where the gospel is shared and the invitation is given.

As you gather together with your co-labourers in the gospel, share your successes and failures in meeting your goals, in an effort to learn from each other. Pray together for those people with whom you are building relationships. This whole process needs to be saturated in prayer and brought before the Lord day and night. The powers of darkness will seek to distract, discourage and destroy any attempts you make to build bridges with those Satan still holds captive. Trust God to complete what He started - be diligent and faithful and you will see many bridges established in the days ahead and many souls transformed by the God's amazing grace!

*"Finally, brethren, pray for us, that the message of the Lord may spread rapidly and be honoured, just as it was with you.*

( 2 Thessalonians 3:1 )

## BRIDGING THE GAP – Part 7

*'What is the Gospel?'*

by Rev. Robert Griffith

In our study of *Relationship Evangelism*, we have spent six weeks now looking at the process and the practical aspects of building relationships, sharing our faith and introducing the good news of Jesus Christ into someone's life. There is really not much more I can say in that regard and I would encourage you to go over those six sermons a few times and become familiar with the process I outlined so you can then focus on putting it into practice as I know many of you have already.

Believe it or not, the relational aspect of evangelism is relatively simple - it takes time (lots of time!); it takes prayer (lots of prayer!); it takes commitment (lots of commitment); but building bridges for the Gospel is not a difficult task.

However when we get to the point of bringing the Gospel message, the good news of Jesus Christ, across that bridge and into someone's heart and mind - we can get weak at the knees and the bridge all of a sudden narrows in our perception, the other side disappears from view, it starts to sway as the winds of doubt and uncertainty reach gale force; we may start to feel like we are on one of those dangerous suspension bridges you see in the movies!

This is the point at which *Relationship Evangelism* hits a dead end for so many people. The most common point of failure, far and above all others, in *Relationship Evangelism* has to do with our lack of understanding of the Gospel. So today we will take a step back and ask a pretty important question, one which I fear many Christians in the world never ask and worse still, they don't know how to give a clear answer if they are asked. The question simply is: What is the Gospel? I've answered that many times over the years but it never hurts to recap and do some revision. So let's do that now, shall we?

The best place to start is at the very beginning – as we look at the Church Jesus birthed over 2,000 years ago. The Gospel was very clear to His first disciples. Jesus taught them well and the Holy Spirit continued teaching them as the mission of Christ spread worldwide. There were no Bible colleges back then; no theological degrees; no written qualifications required before you preached and ministered in Christ's name. The Holy Spirit was the One Who guided everyone into the Truth and opened their hearts to this Gospel, this good news in Jesus Christ.

The cross of Christ defined this new Church which bore His name and all over the world that Gospel produced great fruit as men, women and young people embraced its life-changing truth and power. Those early believers lived and died by the Apostle Paul's proclamation:

**Romans 1:16** *"For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes."*

Paul considered the Gospel to be very important and so should we. So let's take a closer look.

The Gospel begins with God. The whole problem facing humanity from the very beginning, comes back to the nature of God. Now I need to warn you here, because I am about to share with you the most terrifying and confronting truth in all of Scripture. I have shared this before. Do you remember? This is a truth which is stated over and over again and yet we don't realise how terrifying it really is. Are you ready? The most terrifying and confronting truth in all of Scripture is this:

**God is good.**

Why is that very positive truth so confronting? What's so terrifying about God being good? Well, the answer is as simple as it is shocking. It's terrifying to know that God is good, because we are not. So if we truly want to understand the Gospel, the good news, we must first understand the bad news and that is, **God is good - but we are not.**

God is good because He is holy; because God is holy, He is just; because God is just He cannot do anything other than reject that which is unholy – and that includes us. So the problem for God from almost the beginning of humanity, is that He is good and we are not. God cannot violate His attributes. He cannot do something that contradicts Who He is. God is a righteous God and that is a good thing. We certainly would not want an evil God to be in charge of the universe, would we? It is a profoundly good thing that God is good, righteous, pure, holy and just.

Herein lies a huge problem for God, Who loves us and desires that we will dwell in His presence for eternity. If God is just, then what does He do with us? What does a good God do with sinners like us? Yes, politically incorrect as it may be to even suggest such a thing in 2022, we are sinners. We've sinned against God; we've sinned against each other; we've sinned against creation; we are sinners by nature. We are sinners from birth. All of creation calls for our condemnation. So if this holy, pure, righteous God is truly just, then what does He do with us?

Think about this. Sometimes we just need to be logical, before we try to be theological. If a just God simply pardons the wicked, He is no longer just. What do you call a judge who sweeps your crime under a rug? Righteous? No, he is corrupt! In the same way, if a holy God calls the wicked to Himself to have fellowship with Him, then He's not a holy God. Holiness and sin cannot occupy the same space any more than you can go forward and backward at the same time. It's just impossible.

Therefore the greatest question running through the whole Bible and all of human history, is this: how can a just God pardon wicked men and women and still be just? How can a holy God call unholy sinners into fellowship with Himself for eternity and remain holy? The answer is found in the beautiful, terrible cross of Jesus Christ. In that old rugged cross, we find this a revelation of the fullness of God's attributes. God is just so He must condemn sin – but God is also love and so He does whatever it takes to save His lost, rebellious, much-loved children and bring them home.

In order to satisfy His justice, God's love compels Him to become one of us and that man, Jesus, does what none of us could ever do – He lives a perfect, sinless life as a human being, and then goes to the cross where the sins of the whole world are cast upon Him.

So the justice of God, the full wrath of God against all unholiness, came down upon one man, Jesus Christ, God's Son and our Saviour. The exact measure that was required to fully satisfy the justice of God, was brought against Jesus. As He took His final few breaths as a man, Jesus declared, "*It is finished.*" When He spoke those profound words Jesus was not just talking about His human life as it came to an end, He was talking about His mission to secure the salvation of God's lost children.

This means that Jesus has done all that was required to pay the price for all sin. That truth should cause your spirit to explode with gratitude and worship! As the Apostle Paul wrote in his letter to the Corinthian Church many years later, at that very moment on the cross, this Jesus Who knew no sin, willingly 'became' sin for us. At that moment, Jesus endured the pain, the agony and the torture of seeing His Father, with Whom and in Whom He had dwelled for eternity, turn His back on Jesus the man – as He took on the sin of the world.

That feeling of separation from the Father which we deserved, was felt fully by Jesus the man. The Father could never turn from Jesus, the Son of God, for they are one and the same, but Jesus the man, felt the isolation and judgement of God on all sin.

This is so important for us to understand. All those Easter sermons you've heard about the agony of the crucifixion and the torture Jesus endured for us on Calvary – they all miss the *real* agony of the cross! When Jesus was in the garden of Gethsemane pleading with God to take this cup from Him, do you think He was worried about the lashes He was about to feel on His back; the crown of thorns they would jam onto His head or the agony of a crucifixion? The martyrs who followed Him all went to their death singing hymns of triumph!

No, Jesus was not agonising over being mocked, beaten up and murdered by the Romans. Jesus was overwhelmed by the expectation that His Father would turn away from Him as a man as He 'became sin' for us. It was the weight of your sin and mine, separating Him from His Father which crushed this innocent man to death physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually. The agony of the cross was deeply personal for Jesus and gut-wrenchingly painful as the prophecy of Isaiah 53 was finally fulfilled, a prophesy which said, "*It was the Lord's will to crush Him.*" There was no other way God could secure your salvation and mine. The Bible says the wages of sin is death – so Jesus died, on our behalf.

Then on the third day He sealed His atoning sacrifice for all humankind by rising from the dead, conquering sin, death and Satan, once and for all time. Then for the first time in history, a resurrected human being entered the glory of heaven and Jesus is now seated at the right hand of God. That's why there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved. Jesus is the way, the truth and the life. He is the ONLY way; He is the ONLY truth; He is the ONLY life; He is the only One Who can rescue us from condemnation and fully reconcile us to our God for eternity. There is only one God and one Mediator between us and God: that is Jesus Christ.

So how should we respond to this amazing Gospel? Like those listening to Peter on that amazing day of Pentecost, we too should be cut to the heart when we realise what Jesus did to secure our salvation and we too should ask, "*So what shall we do?*" The answer we hear is the same as Peter's answer on the day of Pentecost: REPENT and BELIEVE THE GOSPEL. God will do all the rest. It's that simple.

Now there's a lot of confusion these days about the word *repent*. So let me explain what it really means. The Greek word which is translated repent simply means 'to change our mind.' But we need to understand that in the culture in which the Bible was written, the 'mind' was something very different to what we might understand the mind to be in our modern western culture. In our culture, to change our mind is pretty superficial in most circumstances. For example, tonight I was going to have roast chicken for dinner, but now I've decided to have roast lamb instead. I changed my mind. But that is certainly not repentance.

In the Bible our 'mind' refers to the mind and the heart; the very control centre of our whole being. It's the control centre of our will, our emotions, our intellect and our very thoughts. When Paul wrote to the Roman believers (Romans 12:2) and pleaded with them to be transformed by the renewing of their mind he was talking about **the total transformation of their whole way of thinking, believing and living**. That's what it means to repent.

So in the face of this amazing revelation of God in the Gospel, we cry out to Him for mercy and He gives us the gift of repentance. That's right, repentance is not something we can do on our own. It is a gift from God. When writing to Timothy, Paul spoke about God "*granting His people repentance leading them to the knowledge of the truth.*" (2 Timothy 2:25)

One of the most famous parables Jesus told was the parable of the Prodigal Son. It is a simple story about the human condition and how we are reconciled to God, our heavenly Father. However, 99% of the time I have heard people preach or teach on this parable, they have totally missed the mark! I'm sure you have heard it said that this wayward son repented of his sinful life when he was on his face in a pig pen eating the scraps from the ground. He woke up to himself, realised he was a sinner, so he repented and returned to his father. No he didn't. Read the story again. He did no such thing.

This rebellious son thought about his father's servants eating a wholesome meal and sleeping in a warm bed in what used to be his home, enjoying a far better life than he was. So this son decided to go home and strike a deal with dear old dad to employ him as a servant. He would tell father that he didn't expect to be treated like a son anymore but asked if he could please treat him as a servant so he didn't have to eat pig scraps anymore! So the son heads home to bargain with his father.

Before he could even open his mouth and insult his father with such a proposition, his loving dad ran to him, embraced him, loved him, forgave him, poured grace into his life and treated him as the son he always was and always will be. Then Dad threw him a party! At *that* point, I believe his son would have been overwhelmed by grace and full of repentance! His whole life would have been transformed by the love of his father! This is not the parable of the prodigal son – this is the parable of the forgiving Father and that is the gospel in a nutshell. Repentance is the first fruit of the grace of God in your life.

### **Repentance is what God gives to you freely when He gives Himself to you freely!**

Let me give you the most profound example I know of repentance. Back when the Apostle Paul was still Saul the persecutor, he was sent to Damascus to capture Christians and probably have some of them killed. Now when he left for Damascus that day Paul sincerely thought that Jesus of Nazareth was the greatest blasphemer ever to walk this earth. Paul also thought that all these followers of Jesus, these *Christians*, were an absolute abomination - a terrible sect that needed to be destroyed.

That's what Paul thought and therefore it permeated his intellect, his emotions, his will and it defined his entire purpose in life. But on the road to Damascus that very day, Paul had an encounter with the resurrected Christ Himself – Paul ran head first into the Gospel. At that point Paul's whole thinking changed. His entire reality proved to be wrong. Everything he was taught and was teaching others was exposed in the light of the risen Christ before him. Paul's entire concept of God was wrong and so the first fruit of this encounter with the living God, in Christ, was repentance. God granted Paul the gift of repentance and he then began to think very differently.

This was not some superficial change of mind. This was a life-changing, name-changing, purpose-transforming event in Paul's life and he was never, ever the same again. The persecutor became the persecuted. As this one man repented, he had more impact on the spread of the Gospel than all the other Apostles combined. This change of mind, heart, soul and life-mission also resulted in Paul writing almost half the New Testament! Now we are not the Apostle Paul, but guess what? Paul's repentance is the same repentance God will grant to us, as He leads us to the knowledge of the Truth. To repent, is to realise that your entire view of reality was wrong and at that point the Holy Spirit will open your eyes to see and open your heart to submit to the reality of Who God is; Who Jesus is; what He's done for you; who you are because of Jesus and why you are still on this planet.

So perhaps I should ask you today, have you truly repented? Have you been so overwhelmed by the love and grace of your Heavenly Father that you have changed your mind about God? Has that change of mind led to a change in your intellect, a change of your will, a change in your emotions, a change in your attitude to God, to yourself, to others, to money, to fame, to life in this world?

- Things you once loved, do you now hate?
- Things you once hated, ignored or rejected, do you now love?
- The holiness you once dismissed, do you now desire?
- The Christ Whom you did not allow to be part of your life in any significant way, is He now the most attractive, beautiful, wonderful person you could ever encounter?
- Do you now consider the kingdom of heaven to be a 'pearl of great price'?

These are just some of the fruits which reveal that a divine work of repentance has been done in your heart. But not only are we to repent of our wrong thinking and living, we are to then believe the Gospel. Repentance and belief go hand-in-hand.

Repentance means we stop thinking one thing and start thinking something new. We let go of one reality in order to embrace a new reality, which is Jesus Christ. We acknowledge every day of our lives that there is absolutely nothing in us which can save us from the holiness of God which burns against all sin. Only Jesus can save us and only Jesus has saved us. We must get to that point where we live within the truth of that line in the old hymn: *“Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to the cross I cling.”*

A vital part of our repentance from wrong thinking is our acceptance of the truth that our salvation and reconciliation with God has all been achieved by Jesus Christ, through His life, death and resurrection. To believe the Gospel is to affirm that you have only one hope in this life and the next and all of that hope is found in Jesus Christ. Our salvation was achieved over 2,000 years ago when Jesus bled and died for us. That salvation and new life becomes real in our experience today, through repentance and believing and embracing the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

However this repentance is not a one-off event. Repentance is a daily choice. Every day we are being bombarded with lies about us and God and Jesus Christ and every day we need to reject wrong thinking and turn back to Jesus. We need to affirm our belief in Jesus and His finished work on the cross every day. In fact, repentance is more important than ever for Christians today because false teaching is threatening to bring the Church to its knees! Paul warned us all those years ago that there would be false Christs, false teachers and even doctrines taught in the Church by demons!

So how do you know if you have accepted the truth and not some counterfeit ‘gospel?’ You will know by the fruit in your life. You will know that you have received the Gospel and accepted the free gift of salvation in Christ when this new life in Him becomes your daily experience. You won’t always be on the emotional high you were when your eyes were first opened, but every day of your life, in some way, you will re-affirm that God is good, God is real, you are loved and forgiven, restored and heaven-bound, all because of the finished work of Jesus Christ.

Little by little, you will be transformed more and more into the image of Jesus Christ – for that is God’s will for us all. You will deepen in your lifestyle of repentance and renewal. You will grow in grace. Your relationship with God will intensify in its intimacy. Your faith will be strengthened and your discernment will develop. Your desire to be in the presence of God in worship will grow every day. This is the fruit of true God-given repentance and the manifestation of Jesus Christ in your life. Perhaps God has revealed the truth of the Gospel to you for the first time today. Or maybe God has reminded you of a truth you had long forgotten. Either way, if the Spirit of God is at work in your heart right now, you will know it and I want to encourage you to respond to God today. Embrace the life-changing truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ today.

Print these two affirmations and place them somewhere prominent. Then read them out loud every single morning as you greet the new day and let the Spirit of God release the power and reality of this Gospel into every area of your life!

***While were sinners, CHRIST DIED FOR US***

( Romans 5:8 )

***While we were dead in our sin, GOD MADE US ALIVE IN CHRIST***

( Ephesians 2:5 )

## BRIDGING THE GAP – Part 8

### *'Telling our Story'*

by Rev. Robert Griffith

In our last sermon we took a closer look at what the Gospel is (and isn't) and that is really important. Having a clear understanding of what God has done for us in Christ is essential if we are to lead people to Christ and especially if we are to disciple them in their faith. We should have no trouble explaining to someone how Jesus secured our salvation through His sinless life, sacrificial death and glorious resurrection. However, in *Relationship Evangelism*, we are not called upon to preach to anyone or get into any deep theological principles – that all comes later in their discipleship journey.

Whilst it's really important that we know the Gospel and understand God's Word, what we really need to be prepared to share is *our story*, or what many people might call our *testimony*. If we start talking theology or quoting Bible Verses to a person who has had nothing to do with the Christian faith, we will most probably push them away. The most powerful tool we have at our disposal when seeking to lead someone to Christ is our story and we need to be prepared to share our testimony at any time.

However let's be honest here, sharing our testimony with someone isn't always easy, certainly not at first anyway. It is hard because all those walls that we may have so carefully constructed are forced to be stripped down. We can no longer hide behind a façade and sometimes the painful parts of our past are brought to the light. So knowing how to share our testimony with others is definitely something that requires intentionality and patient preparation. So today I would like us to consider how we might prepare our testimony so that we are always ready to provide a reason for the hope we have, as Peter exhorted us in his first letter:

**1 Peter 3:15-16** *"But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behaviour in Christ may be ashamed of their slander."*

There are times when sharing our testimony can really miss the mark. In fact there is even an issue with the phrase 'our testimony.' When we are sharing our testimony, it is not so much about us as it is about Jesus. More often than not our testimony can go one in two ways. Either we hold back a lot of details out of fear and hurt about our past and as a consequence, our testimony loses the significant impact of exactly what God has done in our lives ... or ... we end up speaking too much about ourselves and we become the central character in the story, when in reality, Jesus must always be the main character. Our testimony can become a long, dramatized life story with a little of God on the side!

A lot of testimonies are focused on self. People talk about *their* faith and *their* decision despite the obstacles and difficulties they faced. This is not a true testimony if our faith and our choices become the focus. The testimony that we are called to share (and the only testimony which others will relate to) always focuses on Jesus.

Simply put: **if OUR story is not HIS story then we have no story worth telling.**

Of course we are in this story but our testimony is about what God has done for us, in us and through us because of Jesus Christ. Telling someone what WE have done to overcome the struggles in our life is no help to them at all because they are not us and they need a power beyond themselves.

By contrast, telling someone about what our God and Creator has done in our life and the complete transformation we have experienced because of His love, His grace and His power, is a story every person can relate to immediately as they are led to the point of thinking, *"Well, if God did that for you, maybe He will do it for me."* It is at this point that the Spirit of God can use our story to lead another person to embrace the love of God in Christ.

So we need to learn how to share our testimony in a way where it is a healthy mixture of being open and vulnerable about our life story, but humble enough to keep the story focused on Jesus rather than ourself. This can be really challenging, but while you might lack the confidence in sharing your past so that you can bring glory to the Lord or you may find it difficult to lay down your pride and hurt from the past to shift the focus to the Lord, it really is possible to learn how to share your testimony with others in a way that glorifies the Lord and leads them to Him.

While you may never become a preacher or teacher of God's Word you can certainly learn how to share your testimony with others in a way that truly highlights your trust in Him and emphasizes the change that God has made in your life from the moment you truly said 'yes' to Him.

**1 John 1:3** *"We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard..."*

Your story is an eyewitness account of how God has changed your life and people can relate to a story like that. People can relate to experiences. When they hear a story, they immediately try to see how their own experiences or outlook in life fits with yours. People seek to be understood, to feel connected, seen and accepted.

Testimonies can really be a powerful way to share the Gospel with others and form a connection with someone who is desperately seeking that all-knowing and all-consuming love of God. So let's look at some tips which will help us prepare our testimony.

## 1. Pray

Before all else, through the power of prayer, we should pray to God about our testimony. Ask Him to guide our mind and our heart as we prepare our testimony. When we pray to God first about our testimony, aside from asking Him for the guidance and strength that is needed when it comes to sharing your testimony with others, it also helps us to seek Him first before all else. So, before we begin to prepare our testimony we ask the Lord for guidance and we need to be confident when we ask because God wants this to work even more than we do!

**1 John 5:14** *"This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us."*

## 2. Check your heart and motive

It is easy to run away with our feelings and begin talking about the deep hurt and tragic circumstances that we've gone through. It's also easy to hide behind a facade by refusing to be authentic and truly showing others what God has done through the pain in our life. So, when we prepare our testimony, we should check our heart's condition. We don't just check our heart's condition before we start writing our testimony, but check it during and after too!

We can ask ourself questions like...

*"Am I the central character of this story or is Jesus?"*

*"Can I see myself brushing over necessary details out of fear?"*

*"Am I downplaying God's glory and mercy?"*

It is actually really surprising how often and how easily our hearts can become separated from God when we begin allowing the emotions from our past to take a larger priority in our story compared to the promises and deliverance that God gifted us in the midst of it all.

**1 John 3:20** *"If our hearts condemn us, we know that God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything."*

### 3. Plan your testimony

Without being too prescriptive, in general terms a normal testimony will usually describe three key things about your journey:

- a) How your life was before you met Jesus
- b) When and how you became a follower of Jesus
- c) How your life is now you are a disciple of Jesus

By way of example a testimony could go something like this:

Life Before Jesus:

*“Growing up, I was raised in a Christian family. I had two loving parents, but I struggled deeply with perfectionism and living up to expectations raised by myself and the world. I was the definition of a lukewarm Christian who went through all the motions of a ‘good’ Christian, but inside, I was not really close to God. The things I was so much more concerned about included how I looked to those around me and a lot less about how I was before God. I hated trying to reach out to Him because it only reminded me of how imperfect I was - and that was hard for a young person who thought their self-worth was based on their performance and perfection.”*

When I met Jesus:

*“I had two really awesome friends who spoke truth and life into me. However, my heart wasn’t yet ready to receive Jesus fully and completely. But gradually over time, He showed me the pride that was in my heart and the selfish desires that I had to conform to the world. At first, I was so utterly resistant to it because I had lived my life thinking that I was a good person. After all, I was striving so hard to be perfect! But it took a broken and toxic friendship before I realized how far I had fallen from Him.”*

How my life has changed:

*“Now I know (even though I still struggle with it) that the foundation upon which I had built my identity was unstable and unreliable. I would reach highs when I lived up to my own expectations but fall so deep when I made even the slightest mistake. When God really began to show me how perfectly imperfect I was and how perfection could only be achieved through Him, my heart began to anchor itself in Him and not in my performance. It is an ongoing journey and even though it isn’t easy, He has called me to share my testimony with others so that other people can experience the unwavering presence of Jesus Christ in their life.”*

Now that is just a really simplified idea of a testimony, but you get the idea. A testimony often follows the above layout and especially when you don’t have too much experience in sharing your testimony with others, having a structure to follow can be really helpful to keep you on track and it’s easily understandable to the listeners.

### 4. Look at the Apostle Paul’s example of a testimony

There are many accounts in the Bible of people sharing about how God transformed their lives. One of the most well-known testimonies is shared by the apostle Paul. Paul went from persecuting Christians to following Jesus, planting Churches and writing over half of the New Testament. Read his testimony in Acts 22:1-21 and you will easily see the progression of Paul’s story:

- Paul opens with a brief history of his life (vv. 1–3)
- Paul tells about his life before Christ (vv. 4-5)
- Paul explains how he came to know Christ (vv. 6-13)
- Paul tells about his life after coming to know Christ (vv. 14-18)
- Paul closes with his obedience to Christ (vv. 19-21)

## 5. Write out your testimony

Before you even begin sharing your testimony with someone, write it down first. You might be surprised by the results! When we write, we have more time to think carefully about what we want to say. Writing out your testimony can help with the intentionality behind it. Plus, it is an awesome way to begin visualizing it all before you are called to speak out loud. You will be surprised how quickly you are able to commit your written testimony to memory – perhaps not word for word – but close enough.

## 6. Avoid using 'Christianese' language

"Churchy" words can alienate listeners/readers and keep them from identifying with your story. People who are unfamiliar or even uncomfortable with Church and Christianity might not understand what you are saying. They may mistake your meaning or even be turned off by your 'foreign' language. Here are some examples:

Avoid using the term ***born again***. Instead, use these words:

- spiritual birth
- spiritual renewal
- spiritual awakening
- come alive spiritually
- given a new life
- my eyes were opened

Avoid using ***saved***. Instead, use terms like:

- rescued
- delivered from despair
- found hope for life

Avoid using ***lost***. Instead, say:

- heading in the wrong direction
- separated from God
- had no hope
- had no purpose

Avoid using ***gospel***. Instead, consider saying:

- God's message to man
- the good news about Christ's purpose on earth
- God's message of hope for the world

Avoid using ***sin***. Instead, try one of these expressions:

- rejecting God
- missing the mark
- falling away from the right path
- disobedience to God
- going my own way with no thought of God

Avoid using **repent**. Instead, say things like:

- admit I was wrong
- change one's mind, heart, or attitude
- decide to turn away
- turn around
- make a 180 degree turn from what you were doing
- obey God
- follow God's Word

## 7. Practice sharing your testimony

Now this can be challenging for those who have never practiced speaking out loud. But it can be a really valuable part of committing your prepared testimony to memory. Our goal here is to be able to share our story as naturally as possible whilst being careful we don't let our thoughts wander and the testimony lose its power. Practicing out loud can be a really important part of your preparation.

Many people find it hard to articulate their thoughts into comprehensible sentences sometimes. This is because our mind can at times take massive leaps before our mouth can catch up! So some of us sound like babbling ducks when we are put on the spot. That is why it is so important for us to plan our testimony and write it out in full so when we commit it to memory our mind is already pre-programed and we won't ever be lost for words when the opportunity presents itself. A testimony is something powerful and sharing our testimony with someone is important enough for us to devote some time to make sure we are prepared.

## 8. Share your testimony whenever the Lord opens the door

It goes without saying, the more we do something, the easier it becomes. The more we put ourselves in a difficult situation, the less difficult it will feel next time. So the more we share our testimony with others, the better we'll get at telling our story! However, one thing which is really important - that is to guard our heart. It is absolutely amazing to be open about our testimony and sharing it with people so that the glory of God can be shared with them. But God also calls us to exercise wisdom and protect our hearts - not out of fear, but out of wisdom.

**Proverbs 4:23** *"Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it."*

Sometimes we may feel called to share our full testimony with someone we have only just met but from my experience that would be rare. We aren't called to be vulnerable with absolutely everyone on every occasion. We are called to use the wisdom that God has sown into our heart and listen to His Spirit so we know when it is time to be vulnerable and share it all as opposed to those times when we just give a 'Readers Digest' condensed version which does not require us to open up as fully to a stranger. That's why this tip says we should wait for the Lord to open the door and not just launch into it when we think there's an opportunity. Sharing our story in smaller instalments may seem strange but at times that is the wisdom of God at work helping us to guard our heart.

## Conclusion

Always remember that you do not have the power in and of yourself to convince anyone of spiritual truth. The Holy Spirit convicts people of their need to know Christ.

**John 16:8,13** *"When he comes, he will prove the world to be in the wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment ... when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come."*

As you pray for those with whom you desire to share your personal testimony, be sure to ask God's Spirit to honour the proclamation of His word, to convince people of their need, and to strengthen you as you share the gospel.

God calls each disciple of Christ to be a witness to all that we have "*seen and heard*" (1 John 1:3). With *Relationship Evangelism*, witnessing becomes a lifestyle - we are a witness at all times. Loving others and showing our genuine concern for them are practical ways to communicate the Love of Christ. We also witness by our life. Our actions are usually more revealing than our words. Our actions, however, are not sufficient to communicate to another person the message of the Gospel of Christ. We need to witness by our words as well - to identify openly with Jesus Christ and to tell others how they can be reconciled to God.

One of the most effective means of communicating this to another person is through the story of how God has worked in our life - our personal testimony. The best thing of all about our testimony is that nobody on this planet can disagree with us when we tell our story. We can share Bible references and talk theology and find ourselves in a debate or disagreement pretty quickly. However, our experience is just that: OUR experience and whilst it may be very different to other people's experience, they cannot disagree with us or debate the truth of what we have personally gone through. That is why our testimony is so powerful.

In fact we are told in the Bible that we actually triumph over the enemy of God (Satan) through the blood of Jesus and the word of our testimony!

**Revelation 12:11** *"They triumphed over him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony ..."*

## BRIDGING THE GAP – Part 9

### 'Conquering Fear'

by Rev. Robert Griffith

There's one word in western Christianity that strikes fear into the hearts of God's people. It's not 'Islam,' 'liberalism,' 'socialism,' or 'atheism' (although all those do create irrational fear in Western Christians). I believe the most terrifying word to modern western Christians is 'evangelism.' If you doubt me, just ask a fellow believer when was the last time they actually shared the gospel with an unbeliever - the answer will most likely be silence. When we question why it's hard to share the gospel with people, many answers will come forth, but the common denominator is usually fear.

Modern western Christians are afraid of looking unintelligent, weird, awkward, or ignorant. We live in a celebrity-obsessed culture, where to look uninformed, unintellectual, or unattractive is the highest of social sins. However, we are not called as Christ's Church to proclaim our own excellencies (we have none) but to "*proclaim the excellencies of Him who called us out of darkness into His marvellous light.*" (1 Peter 2:19).

So how do we conquer this irrational fear which can confront us when we think about sharing our faith with someone? Well this whole teaching series is designed to do just that. By embracing the simple principles of *Relationship Evangelism*, people have found that the fear they once battled is replaced with a confidence - because building a relationship with someone seems so much less intimidating than changing their view of God. So as I wrap up this teaching series today, let me share three words with you which hopefully you can remember because I made sure they all start with letter 'E'. When *Relationship Evangelism* is working as it should, these three elements will always be present.

### Engagement

What do you think of when you see the word engagement? Do you think of going up to some random person in a confrontational or obnoxious manner? Do you think of being loud or aggressive? Do you think of waving a Bible in the face of a stranger and telling them to repent? Of course not. That's not what engagement means. Engagement in this context is demonstrating to those who don't follow Christ that you affirm them and welcome their opinions by listening to them and seeking to understand what they believe and don't believe and why. When it comes to evangelism, we often think we have to be the ones speaking or even leading the conversation but in effective *Relationship Evangelism* that is never the case. You will not build a good relationship with a person if you do all the talking. In my experience I have found that most people really appreciate it when they see that we truly care about them as fellow human beings and value their opinions and want to know what they think - as opposed to them just representing another notch in our witnessing belt.

The two greatest pieces of advice I could give to those who want to seriously engage in any form of evangelism come straight from the Bible. The first is from Jesus: "*Love God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind... and love your neighbour as yourself.*" (Matthew 22:37,39). Evangelism must come from a heart which is in love with God and a heart which genuinely loves the person with whom they are seeking to build a relationship.

If our evangelism does not flow from our love for God and our love for our neighbour, then we are nothing more than a "*resounding gong or a clanging cymbal.*" (1 Corinthians 13:1). The second piece of advice comes from James 1:19, "... *let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger.*" If we are truly operating out of a genuine love for God and the neighbour with whom we are sharing the message of eternal life, then we will engage with them by eagerly and actively listening. By doing this, we demonstrate our genuine love for them by valuing them as fellow image-bearers of God instead of debating opponents with whom we want to win an argument.

## Empathy

Empathy is defined as, *“The ability to understand and share the feelings of another.”* There is a belief or attitude which emanates from too many modern western Christians that we are holier (and therefore, better) than our non-believing neighbours. True, Christians are made holy in God’s sight because of the work of Christ, but we are not superior to unbelievers, nor do we possess an innate quality of holiness over against them. We easily forget that everything we have (especially salvation), is a free gift of God’s sovereign grace and that we therefore we have nothing to boast about. We too were once *“...dead in the trespasses and sins...”* and *“...were by nature children of wrath...”* (Ephesians 2:1,3).

When we forget that we were once enemies of God and assume a self-righteous superiority, we make our evangelism more about our ‘kind willingness’ to let ‘these people’ join our special club, rather than having a genuine desire to see all of God’s precious children brought home to Him. Empathy allows for a better, God-glorifying way of relating to our unbelieving neighbours.

To various degrees, both believers and unbelievers know what is right and wrong. When confronted by the law, we must admit we’ve all broken it. Since this is commonplace, we have another ally: compassion. We know what it’s like to fight against our true identity and follow after the course of this world; to be constantly drawn away from the Lord to fulfill the lusts of the flesh. God in Christ had compassion on us – if we never forget that, then it will be possible for us to have compassion on others. (1 Corinthians 9:19-23). We should easily relate to others because we know the struggle that sin brings; we know the temptations, the guilt, the shame – and as Christ had compassion on us, that Christlike compassion should flow through us to others.

In my many years of experience in front line ministry I have seen that my willingness to admit that I have sinned against God and continue to battle my fallen, broken humanity actually frees others to admit that as well. When I’m honest and share that as a Christian, I still wrestle with doubts and questions, it frees unbelievers to admit their own doubts and opens up an avenue for some genuine discussion. When I admit that I still wrestle and struggle with sin, it frees them to open up about what sins they struggle with and how that is affecting their lives. We know what it is to be *“...separated from Christ...having no hope and without God in the world.”* (Ephesians 2:12). So we should find it easy to empathise with others as they struggle with their frailty and brokenness.

When we stop pretending that we have it all together, when we are truly honest about our struggles in life and talk about the hope we have in Christ, this shows that we aren’t ‘holier-than-thou,’ but struggling pilgrims going through some of the same issues other people struggle with every day. The difference is we have hope; we have the power and presence of Christ within us to overcome those temptations and sin. Wise transparency, compassion and empathy are far more becoming for the followers of Christ than compelling arguments or sophisticated rhetoric.

## Explanation

At some point during our evangelistic conversations, we have to explain the truth of the gospel. I have talked about this at length in the last two sermons in this series, but it needs to be emphasised again. Too many well-meaning Christians embrace *Relationship Evangelism* with sincerity and enthusiasm only to find themselves stuck in the relationship part and fail to actually share the gospel.

At some point in this relational journey we have to actually break down for the non-believer how they are reconciled to God by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. This is what most Western Christians fear the most. Listening and being empathetic comes so much easier than actually sharing *“... the hope that is within [us]...with gentleness and respect.”* (1 Peter 3:15).

As I stressed in the last sermon, sharing our story (our testimony) is a vital part of sharing the Gospel. People will engage with our story far better than a dry, theological or philosophical presentation of the Gospel. In fact, a sincere and transparent personal testimony will open the door and trigger questions from those with whom we share and then we can begin to explain the gospel to them. Never forget that we cannot convert anyone. It is the role of Holy Spirit to prepare a person's heart, sometimes over months and years. We also need to be led by the same Spirit to be there when the door opens and they are able to embrace spiritual truths. In all forms of evangelism we should never ever forget the wise words of the Apostle Paul:

**1 Corinthians 2:10-14** *“These are the things God has revealed to us by his Spirit. The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God. For who knows a person's thoughts except their own spirit within them? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. What we have received is not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may understand what God has freely given us. This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, explaining spiritual realities with Spirit-taught words. The person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God but considers them foolishness, and cannot understand them because they are discerned only through the Spirit.”*

The moment we think we have the responsibility of convincing another person to embrace spiritual concepts and truth, is the moment we fail in evangelism. If we think that we know what we currently know because we worked it out ourselves, then we are fools to be pitied and we will lead nobody to Christ if we think we have to ‘talk them into’ making a spiritual decision which only the Holy Spirit can empower them to do. As soon as we let go of ALL responsibility for convincing another human being about the things of God, then we are finally positioned to see God do what only God can do.

When speaking to non-Christians, it is important to realize that we no longer live in a culture and time where the Christian worldview is a commonly-held framework for life. Most people around us today do not know or understand Christian concepts and those that do profess a form of spiritual beliefs will use similar words with very different meanings. We therefore must work hard to make Christian truth understandable by explaining our terms and clearing up any misconceptions about the Gospel.

May we never forget that salvation *“belongs to the Lord”* (Jonah 2:9). No matter what tools or methods we utilize, if the Holy Spirit doesn't regenerate a spiritually dead sinner, they won't respond positively to the Gospel. However, the Holy Spirit has been and continues to be pleased to use us and these tools of *engagement, empathy, and explanation* to bring life to people dead in their sins. So our role in the process is very important. The gospel is the message non-Christian image-bearers need to hear and believe in order to be reconciled to the God and it is our privilege to share it with them.

Before I conclude this teaching series on *Relationship Evangelism*, I really need to leave you with some words of caution and warning. There are some hidden traps which people fall into when travelling this road which we really need to know and remember. I want to mention three in particular here. I have already eluded to them in this series, but I believe I need to highlight them now as I finish.

### **1. Don't forget to evangelise!**

This seems silly to say, but it's entirely possible that you can say you are evangelizing without actually evangelizing. Some people hide behind this concept and never get around to actually sharing their faith – actually presenting the Gospel. There is a big difference between not walking up to a stranger and asking them if they have found Jesus and waiting until you are best friends with someone in order to talk to them about anything important. It is not uncommon to see people spend months, even years, with someone developing a relationship, calling it evangelism, but rarely, if ever, sharing the Gospel.

We need to put the nail in the coffin on this whole, *“Preach the gospel, and if necessary use words,”* nonsense. This saying has been attributed to St. Francis of Assisi but the fact is St. Francis never said such a thing ... and neither should you. The gospel is, at its core, a spoken message. It is news to proclaim, and you are not sharing it if you are not speaking it.

Of course our deeds need to match our words and not contradict them. If we speak the Gospel and then live in a way which contradicts our words, the impact of the Gospel will be greatly undermined. But to suggest we can deliver the gospel to someone without actually speaking the Truth of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus and the salvation He has secured for all mankind – is preposterous.

## **2. The longer you wait to introduce the gospel, the harder it is to transition**

Relationships form patterns of interaction. If your friendship forms around regularly watching football, you will spend a lot of time talking about football. If your new relationship starts with a work buddy, then work will regularly be a topic of conversation. This is natural. However, it also means that you have to be intentional and deliberate about the introducing the Gospel early in the relationship. If not, it gets harder and harder to insert it into a conversation and in fact (as explained in the next point) it can backfire seriously if you wait too long before talking about Christ.

The relational stakes only get higher as you wait to bring it up and you will feel this too. The longer the relationship goes on, the harder it is to try and find a way to speak the Gospel. The fear of rejection is stronger as the relationship gets stronger and closer and the topics of conversation begin to cement in to place. If something as radical and important as the Gospel suddenly emerges late in a relationship, the other person would be justified in feeling very uncomfortable because sub-consciously they will wonder why something which seems to be so important to you was never spoken about earlier.

I believe many people expect this magic moment where the relationship is so close that this person cannot refuse to consider the Gospel. I am not saying this never happens, but it is definitely the exception and not the norm. In fact the very nature of a relationship should dictate that everything that is important to you will be visible to this person as you grow close.

If you share about everything else that you hold dear in life and miss the one thing that is the most important reality in your life, then your relationship lacks integrity and the person will have every right to question your whole motive in becoming their friend. Which leads me to the next cautionary word.

## **3. Avoid a ‘bait-and-switch’ deception**

‘Bait and switch’ is a term used to describe a sales scam where customers are lured into a deal with misleading information only to discover the real product was something very different. If you begin developing a relationship with a new friend and purposefully avoid your relationship with Christ and your desire for your new friend to meet Christ, then it can easily be perceived as a deliberate deception when you bring it up later.

Think about this for a minute. Is your relationship with Christ not the most central aspect of your life? Is it not the most important part of your being? I hope your answer is yes . . . so just think about how it will be seen by your new friend if you wait six months before you tell them about the most important aspect of your life. That seems disingenuous at best and makes the whole relationship seem suspect at worst. One of three responses can be expected:

First, they may think your friendship is shallow because you never mentioned this very personal detail. Second, they may think you care little about them because you have this life changing ‘secret’ you have kept from them this whole time.

Finally, they may think the whole relationship is a sham, simply designed for the sales pitch which comes at the end. The Gospel then becomes the 'fine print' a the contract which is not visible until the very end of the 'deal.'

### **So how do we avoid the above traps?**

Speak about your faith and share the gospel (at least in part) as early as possible in the relationship. There will be lots of opportunities to casually mention your Church involvement or your personal views on a political issue based on your faith etc. Don't come on too heavy or speak about it too often. Your goal should be to make sure this person is not shocked or caught off-guard when you eventually decide to share your testimony or explain the Gospel to them. They should already know that you are part of the Church and that you have Christian values and beliefs. If they don't, then it's a poor relationship.

Your whole life, your values and what is really important to you should be a natural part of all the conversations you have early in the relationship. If it's not, and you leave it too late, it may backfire and you will not only miss the opportunity to lead that person to the Lord, you will most probably lose a friend in the process! If part of your desire in this friendship is to share Christ with this person, then open that door early. This will achieve the following four things:

1. Your relationship will have integrity from the outset.
2. It will demonstrate the importance of the Gospel to you.
3. It will allow you to speak naturally about it going forward. No weird transitions this way.
4. It will help you navigate your friendships with new people and know where to invest your time.

By giving people a taste of the Gospel at the beginning of a relationship, you will see who may actually be interested instead of waiting months to find out they have no interest at all in hearing about God. You need to be able to discern early in the relationship if the Holy Spirit has prepared their heart yet. It is easy to race ahead of the Holy Spirit or lag behind. That is why prayer is absolutely essential in this whole process. The whole Christian message is foolishness to someone whose heart has not been opened by the Spirit of God.

When Jesus walked among us as a man He said, *"I only do what I see the Father doing."* (John 5:19). He was constantly in tune with the Holy Spirit and spent many, many hours in prayer. That's why He healed some and not others; spoke to many one day and nobody the next day. He always took His lead from the Holy Spirit so that He did nothing that the Father had not already begun. If we truly follow Jesus and do the same, we will be amazed at what is possible!

----- THE END -----