

## Bridging the Gap

### *Part 1: 'Understanding Evangelism'*

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 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!