

## Bridging the Gap

### *Part 5: 'Building Bridges'*

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 nose-y.

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.