

Bridging the Gap

Part 9: 'Conquering Fear'

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!