

Evangelism

Reflections by Bob Young

Note: I write to add to the conversation on Missional Outreach Network (www.missionaloutreachnetwork.com). The conversation to this point includes a blog by M. Scott Boren, "What Missional Evangelism is Not," a blog by James Nored, "What Missional Evangelism is NOT—and what it should be", and a blog by Miguel Labrador, "The Gospel 'Presented' in a Moment?" I have read these blogs and am adding to the conversation in this reflection. Some of what follows is a restatement or rewriting of previously suggested ideas.

We must understand certain things as we begin to discuss how people come to a saving relationship with God, escaping the brokenness brought about by sin. We must carefully think about the entire process.

1. The process of disciple-making is a teaching process. To make disciples implies sharing information. What information must be shared? Above all, God wants to be recognized and known for who he is; a part of which is communicated in the Gospel ("Good News"). God's nature and identity is made known through Jesus Christ, the living Word. The story of Jesus (the Gospel) also reveals how a broken relationship with God can be reestablished. Soliciting a response to the second without also understanding the first will lead to a self-centered response. The gospel begins with God and naturally leads to what he does to restore relationship in Christ.

2. Some people do not recognize that a spiritual problem exists. If people do not recognize that a God-relationship is desirable and has been broken, sharing information will have little impact. Good News is only good if it has a personal application—otherwise it is neutral, even if I recognize it as "good" for another person. "Because you are my friend, I am glad you won the drawing and I recognize that as good news for you. It may indirectly be good news to me, but it is not directly good news for me—unless you share part of your winnings." In a common biblical analogy used in many evangelism training models, a first step in evangelism is to know and prepare the soil or the field. This is why "cold turkey" presentations are generally ineffective (and often offensive). In most evangelism training materials, too little time is spent in discussing the soil. Developing interest in the gospel is primary, and can be done through curiosity (unanswered Bible questions), felt needs and personal crises, friendships, example, demonstration, and in many other ways.

3. The information to be shared is contained in the Bible (written Word), and especially in the Jesus story (the story of the living Word). This information must be shared. Sharing this information usually involves summarizing it so it can be transferred. This summary cannot include everything in the Bible, but it must include essential components or the "gospel obedience" will not be based on enough information.

[A brief summary of basic information includes an understanding of God, Jesus, God's communication in the Bible, the value of human beings in God's sight, the problem of broken relationship through sin, God's action in Christ, our response, the community, and the nature and results of faithfulness.]

4. Evangelism is technically "good news-ing" or telling the good news, but is more complex than may appear on the surface. Evangelism must share the right information and enough information. Evangelism must not short-circuit the information sharing process in hopes of getting an immediate response. (Those on Pentecost responded quickly because certain elements were already in place. They were interested, they understood the problem, had an awareness of God, and already had a basic orientation.) Evangelism must take into account the soil of the human heart and must patiently prepare

the soil to be ready to receive the seed of the Gospel. Otherwise, we are casting the seed aimlessly and uselessly, feeling good about casting the seed, but not using wisdom to reap a harvest. The gospel transmitted effectively and powerfully brings people to restored relationship with God.

[A summary of God's ultimate purpose: God wants to be recognized as he is through his works, nature and identity, a recognition of the reality of Creator and created; God desires respect, worship and praise from his creation based on his nature; God desires relationship with his human creation; God desires human response to his nature, love and overtures; thus, God desires repentance, a changed view of the world, right thinking about reality, a change of mind and heart and life; God desires that his people reflect his glory.]

5. The gospel can and should be demonstrated. Christians can live according to the gospel, consistent with restored relationship in Christ. This includes the items in the summary immediately above.

These points should inform our methods of sharing the gospel. While the old three-fold description may be worn, it is yet valid. Taking the gospel to others involves presence, proclamation, and persuasion. There is a place for connecting, serving, demonstrating, and ministering, but the power of these activities is limited. There is a need for knowledge, summarized as proclamation—helping others learn and understand the gospel message through Bible study, tracts, presentations, sermons, and classes. This is essential but may not be sufficient without persuasion. Becoming involved in “God conversations” is an effective way to couple presence and proclamation. Such conversations are seldom sufficient proclamation, but can provide beginning points. Presence, proclamation, and persuasion usually occur sequentially. It is unusual that someone should be persuaded without information. Information makes more sense when coupled with examples of Christian living and friendship.

There may be a place for quick, single-lesson Bible studies or gospel presentations, especially when relationship has been established and presence and proclamation have already been occurring, e.g. a person who has been attending church regularly or one who has a lot of previous “churched” experiences. One could characterize the events of Pentecost as a single-lesson approach. Generally I do not use a single-lesson approach.

My preferred approach is a guided Bible study which treats the summary items in #3 above in eight lessons. The study includes Bible texts and questions related to understanding those texts. The study is designed based on standard learning techniques. “Story of Redemption” takes a similar approach, but includes a narrative section and fewer questions. I hope by such extended Bible studies over a period of several weeks to build adequate foundations of knowledge and understanding, commitment, and community relationship that will help the new Christians in beginning their walk with Jesus.