

EVENT EVANGELISM VS. MISSIONAL LIVING

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One of the main evangelistic challenges today, is to anticipate our audience and their comprehension of our gospel in hopes of providing the clearest and best broadcast of the message we are called to share. We may not be able to alter the skepticism of our hearers, but we can empathize with their unanswered questions, looming doubts and general misunderstandings. Don Everts and Doug Schaupp in, “I Once Was Lost”, refer to the five thresholds that most postmoderns have to cross to come to faith today:

- Trust a real Christian
- Become curious about the Christian message
- Become open to change
- Begin a personal seeking after God
- Enter the kingdom

Each of these thresholds present their own challenges. Meeting and trusting a real Christian is key since our story is often the crack in the wall of doubt many are up against in their discovery of authentic faith. Our story can be the beginning of another person’s doubt about their doubts. If people see us as real, thinking people, who also have struggled with legitimate questions like theirs, yet have worked through them to a faith that can also make sense to them—this can be the first step in causing someone to rethink their position of doubt. Our journey to faith can be the opening door to their own curiosity. If we believe, are thoughtful and have considered their questions and have found sufficient reasons to believe, maybe the Christian faith can make sense after all.

Of course, the real tough threshold is being willing to change. As people start to become curious by reason of our own faith, they also take notice of how different our lives are from theirs and the fear of becoming more like us can cause them to ricochet in fear. Being open to change can be the toughest threshold to cross. This is where patience, honesty, admission of our own struggles to believe, challenges with change coupled with much prayer, is the best and greatest help we can offer. If a skeptic can make the journey through the fear of change, they often begin a voracious search for their own belief in God. Entering the kingdom is the natural and final step.

i Everts, Don. *I Once Was Lost: What Postmodern Skeptics Taught Us About Their Path to Jesus* (p. 23). InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition.

We suggest the five C words for each challenging threshold:

1. Compassion—Trust a real Christian
2. Conversation—Becoming curious about the Christian message
3. Community—Become open to change
4. Conviction—Begin a personal seeking after God
5. Conversion—Enter the kingdom

Compassion

The compassion of Jesus or the fruit of the Spirit witnessed in the authentic life of a believer is often the crack in the steel door of doubt. Seeing and experiencing the compassion of Jesus in one who professes faith in Christ is a powerful opening message. David Frost in “Surprise the World” reminds us how Christians in the third century were winning over their Roman skeptics by their treatment of the poor and those in need:

“The message they shared—that God loved the world—was patently absurd to the average Roman; the pagan gods cared nothing for humankind. And yet in the miserable world of the Roman Empire, the Christians not only proclaimed the mercy of God but also demonstrated it. They not only fed the poor; they welcomed all comers, regardless of their socioeconomic status. The nobleman embraced the slave. Moreover, Christians opened their fellowship to anyone irrespective of ethnicity, and they promoted social relations between the sexes and within families. They were literally the most surprising alternative society, and their conduct raised an insatiable curiosity among the average Roman.”ⁱⁱ

Compassion is what nonbelievers need to see in those who claim to follow Jesus. Compassion leads to conversation (“why do you care?”). The contrast of our lives reveal the source of selfless interest. We are called to be the aroma of God in Christ, 2 Corinthians 2:15. Conversation about faith in Jesus often leads to community, community between the one showing such compassion and the one experiencing it; similarly, compassion and conversation can become the opening doors to meeting and fellowshiping with other believers. Authentic Christian community—where broken people are being transformed by the power of Christ—leads to conviction in the gospel. Eventually, this growing personal conviction leads to the final step of commitment and conversion.

There are two internal challenges that Adventists must consider if we are to be appropriately prepared to share Christ with a skeptic and unreceptive audience. First is our lack of preparedness to connect and communicate with others outside of the Adventist faith—Adventist isolation. For the most part, Adventist youth ministry has not been active in reaching to non-Adventist youth. Simply put, in most cases, there has been no strategic evangelistic effort toward non-Adventist youth. Furthermore, our unique Adventist lifestyle, having our own educational system, as well as our Adventist subculture and a message directed mostly to people who believe and trust the Bible, are factors that contribute to the Adventist isolation mentioned above.

ⁱⁱ Frost, Michael. *Surprise the World: The Five Habits of Highly Missional People* (p. 10). NavPress. Kindle Edition.

It's not that there has been no evangelism done by Adventist young people. For example, Generation of Youth for Christ (GYC), Glo Tracts and the Mega Book summer evangelism programs—that train and send Adventist youth to sell Adventist evangelistic resources—they all encourage our youth to share our Adventist message. However, these efforts are generally broad in nature and do not specifically target non-Adventist youth.

The second challenge is related to the first one, perhaps even a byproduct of it. Traditional Adventist evangelism is program driven and has centered on sharing the Adventist message. Programs have their place, but they center on having people *come* instead of *going* and making disciples, like Jesus said to do. The emphasis is on “come to us” instead of going where they are. Our approach has also been heavy on content and biblical truth. It is more information based than relationship based. Yet when we study the method of Jesus, we see him going where people were and sharing a very simple message that God was present in him and through him the kingdom of God was at hand. Also, his approach was not event driven, but people driven. Jesus was the message and his followers were his messengers. Biblical instruction is best left for discipleship and not to be confused with the simple message of the Evangel - the kingdom of God is here!

Perhaps the most important message of all is that evangelism is not something to do to people. It's meant to be a shared experience with people - a dialogue about the meaning of life and great difference the message of Christ and his salvation can make for our life now and forever. It's about what God has done and what God is doing for us!

Taking all this into consideration, I am arguing that when it comes to teaching the church about sharing the gospel, we should scrap the word “evangelism” and call for what I believe Jesus was after all along—something Michael Frost refers to as *true missional living*. Frost reminds us that evangelism is one of the spiritual gifts which means not everyone has it. However, that does not release a believer from living missionally and being used by God to tell her story. Frost defines living missionally as “living questionable lives”, lives that are so radically kind, thoughtful and caring that we become subversive in our practice.

In essence, Frost proposes a two-fold biblical model of evangelism: a) trained evangel, and b) missional living. Of this he writes: “Evangelistic mission works effectively when we are living generous, hospitable, Spirit-led, Christlike lives as missionaries to our own neighborhoods—and when the gifted evangelists in our midst join us in sharing Christ with our neighbors. That's not just good evangelism strategy. That's the biblical model.”ⁱⁱⁱ Frost also uses a table to visually explain this twofold model (see below).

Type of Minister	Priorities	Type of Spoken Ministry
Gifted Evangelists	Clarity in the Gospel; looking for opportunities	Bold proclamation
Evangelistic Believers	Prayer; watchfulness; wise socializing	Gracious answers

ⁱⁱⁱ Frost, Michael. *Surprise the World: The Five Habits of Highly Missional People* (p. 1). NavPress. Kindle Edition.

What does missional living look like? Frost shares a helpful acronym—*BELLS!*^{iv}

- Bless: three people this week—at least one of whom is not a member of your church.
- Eat: with three people this week—at least one of whom is not a member of your church.
- Listen: Spend at least one period of the week listening for the Spirit's voice.
- Learn Christ: Spend at least one period of the week learning Christ.
- Share: Take note of the ways God has used you to alert others to the universal reign of God through Christ.

Frost summarizes the five aspects of the acronym with the following concepts:

Bless	Generosity
Eat	Hospitality
Listen	Spirit-led
Learn	Christ-like
Sent	Missionary

Getting into the BELLS rhythm helps us make God's kingdom our main focus, while keeping us from turning everyone into a mission project. It helps us along the way to live missionally with compassion and real interest in others. In fact, I have started to be mindful of BELLS and to bless others as opportunities arise. Already, I find I am more purposeful in kingdom living and more cheerful as I bless and am being blessed by others. I have even made some notes how to be a natural witness:

1. Pray for God to set up divine appointments.
2. Expect God to lead and use you.
3. Smile.
4. If someone returns your smile, ask about their day. If they don't smile back—move on.
5. Depending on their reply, ask what's so good or bad about their day? Be sure to let God lead.
6. Don't go for a "God sales" pitch. Let the conversation go, but look for opportunities to direct the conversation toward spiritual matters which may lead to a conversation about God or just important life issues that you can both converse about together.
7. It needs to be natural, sincere and authentic. They are not your project! The conversation may just lead to life issues and that's it. Demonstrate real interest in them and be open to the Holy Spirit.

iv Frost, Michael. *Surprise the World: The Five Habits of Highly Missional People* (p. 98). NavPress. Kindle Edition.

8. Trust God for the outcome. Pray for them when they leave and offer future contact if it seems wanted and appreciated.
9. Be open to both, God using you to bless them or them to bless you. It almost always works both ways.
10. Celebrate Gods activity in your life by keeping a journal of your divine encounters with others.

While much more could be added to this list, I think the point is clear: we need to live a missional life and invest our lives in the lives of others as more and more we make the principles of the kingdom of God central in our lives.

Conclusion

In conclusion, missional living keeps us prepared, interacting with people and current in our conversations. It also keeps us focused on the kingdom. It is more about living the gospel story than sharing it. It is process evangelism instead of program evangelism. Missional living will also prepare us to be better evangelists among young people, since it fits with the kind of approach Millennials and Gen Z's are looking for. Missional living is evangelism as a way of life. It is what Jesus modeled, how the disciples learned to become like him and his plan for transforming the world. It is also our best hope for sharing good news with people who have become unreceptive to our message. Missional living is slower paced, and it may appear to take longer, but will be shorter in the long run as others learn to follow our example and begin to live missionally along with us. For those who feel called to run with Jesus' message, let's invite them to live "questionable lives of compassion" that others can hear and receive with joy!