

# RE-THINKING EVANGELISM: A HEART FELT APPROACH

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## Abstract

*The world is changing and so must the way we do evangelism. Something everyone throughout the world shares is the fact that we all experience and exhibit feelings and emotions. When we examine these feelings and emotions we hold the key to the most powerful evangelism technique— ministering to the heart of the individual. Ministering to the heart in turn opens individuals to personal healing, spiritual growth and the understanding of identity.*

## The Problem

I remember being made to attend weeks of prayer at the local academy church when I was a high school student. There was a pervasive feeling of discontent regarding the required attendance of the twice-daily meetings. However, regardless of the negative feelings that accompanied each week of prayer, I was always amazed that I would come away from these week long events completely spiritually charged to serve God in the greatest way.

In college, the generally negative feelings towards these spiritually emphasized weeks did not exist to the same degree. What was consistent however was the feeling of being spiritually charged. In both cases, this charged up feeling would be a burning sensation that would last anywhere from a week to a month before sizzling off.

Reflecting on these two segments of my adolescence and the religious programming geared for youth, the question must be asked, "What does it take for one to move from merely listening to actually responding—making a permanent change in one's life?" Pondering this question has unveiled further thoughts and questions beyond those dealing individuals. For example, when it comes to those who will be pastors, what about ministry as a whole?

As society continues to change, the numbers of those in need of spiritual sustenance grows and will continue to grow. Of the many different and

important areas of ministry, evangelism stands out as an essential tool capable of addressing the personal needs of individuals in phenomenal ways. The college campus is a fertile ground for evangelism. In such an environment, people are beginning to question and think through issues, many for the first time in their lives. That makes this stage of life a critical moment for stimulation and growth. How we reach out and evangelize now can have a momentous effect on how these students will later reach out to the world. What will it take for leaders to evangelize on college campuses and what methods will they use?

## Evangelism Defined

Evangelism, as defined by David Bosch, is "the dimension and activity of a church's mission which offers everyone the equal opportunity to be directly challenged to a reorientation of their lives."<sup>1</sup> Noteworthy words in this definition include "everyone" and "equal." Offering a life reorientation to everyone equally assumes that those doing the evangelizing have taken into account the life situations of those being ministered to so as to better relate to where they are in life's journey. Paul understood this in Ephesians when he wrote, "Remember that you were at that time separate from Christ, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world."<sup>2</sup> By emphasizing their personal past, Paul ignited their understanding of the fact that they had issues in

their lives that needed to be recognized and remembered. This could help them relate to others who were currently experiencing troubles and hardships. Paul brought about a new sense of thinking. By putting the Ephesians in touch with their own selves, he opened them up to better relate to those in the wider community and world.

## **Biblical Evangelism**

The critical question that must be asked is “What then should evangelism look like?” After his wilderness temptation Jesus returned to Nazareth where he attended the synagogue on Sabbath. Reading from the book of Isaiah Jesus spoke, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he anointed me to preach the Gospel to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed, to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord” (Luke 4:18,19). Simply put, Jesus, through this simple discourse at the synagogue, was articulating how evangelism was meant to be. He revealed that the nature of God meets the needs of those who are in need. The concept of God supplying when there are felt needs was exactly what Jesus was attempting to relay. Not only does God speak individually to people, but He also works through others, as we see in Jesus, to changes lives, give new hope, outlook and security. Jesus’ view on evangelism, in every way, emphasized the supplying of human needs.<sup>3</sup>

Rob Frost echoes this same ideology when he states, “the Gospel is most relevant where it matches another person’s needs.”<sup>4</sup> This is what Jesus taught in the synagogue, and which he later exemplified in the Sermon on the Mount when he blessed the poor, the hungry and the poor in spirit while preaching on the hillside. It was not just a matter of talk, but also a matter of necessary action. When it comes to evangelism, Robert Schuller has proposed that you must “find a need, and meet it.”<sup>5</sup> The underlying reality is that everyone possesses a need. The needs may vary based on the individual, but given that we are all products of a sinful world, we cannot escape the fact that we have needs. At the very least, we must acknowledge that the needs of others might keep them from a fruitful relationship with Christ. We are all victims of Sin and therefore we collectively suffer the consequences. However,

we are called to address those needs and bring others to an understanding of their worth as children of God. This brings meaning to their lives while at the same time validates their life experience. Such ministry can only be done when the needs of the heart are met.<sup>6</sup>

## **What It Looks Like**

Jesus met a Samaritan woman at a well on a typical blistering day.<sup>7</sup> With the assumption that there would be no one around to dispute or delay her retrieving of water, it must have come as a surprise to have a Jewish man come forward and proceed to ask for a drink. The approach Jesus used in asking for water is a key point to understand the methodology of evangelizing by meeting the needs of others. It was obvious that this woman had a physical need—she was thirsty. It was the perfect opportunity for Jesus to extend an invitation to voice her emotional and spiritual needs as well. As Jesus began to discuss the personal issues in this woman’s life, she was convinced that she needed his “living water.” The end result was that one woman went back and was able to draw many, based on Jesus’ evangelism to the needs of her heart. This woman’s struggle with sincerity, genuineness and adultery was brought to the surface when Jesus linked her physical need to the needs of her heart.

David Henderson suggests, “For something to be relevant...two things need to be true. First, whatever it is... needs to be pertinent to my life. It has to address the issues I’m wrestling with, answer the questions I’m asking, meet my needs.”<sup>8</sup> As we follow the story of Jesus and the Samaritan women, we see that not only was she physically thirsty, but she was in need of a spiritual change as evidenced by her haste in accepting Jesus’ offer. Christ took her spiritual and emotional issues and addressed them in a relevant way she was sure to understand, linking them to physical needs.

## **Putting It Into Practice**

Henderson has also proposed, “One of the convictions that unites Christians is that the Bible speaks to our issues. The Bible has actual relevance.”<sup>9</sup> Evangelism in a modern setting does not need to look any different than that of Jesus ministering to the woman at the well. Frost depicted

it this way, "The task of the evangelist is to tell the story of Jesus, but to tell it in such a way that it relates to the ordinary lives of men, women and children. The challenge is to apply this story in ways that relate to people's search for meaning, and to their deep-rooted and personal felt needs."<sup>10</sup> Therefore, Christ's consistent method of evangelism must be constantly shifting, changing and morphing to meet the specific needs of those searching.

For example, when preparing an evangelistic seminar series, designing a series based on the natural hungering and desire of man could be a springboard into a host of topics. The need for rest or solitude or peace are all needs that everyone experiences. This provides a connection—a foothold to gain access to the heart of those we seek to reach. By addressing the heart and felt needs that people experience daily, we are able to make a connection with the real matters of the heart, making it relevant to their lives.

If our purpose in reaching out to students is to draw in others, then it is imperative that we consider the approach of Jesus if we want similar results. We must cater our evangelism to the immediate needs of others if we are to reach their hearts. There is a natural attraction to issues and topics of the heart because people struggle with these very things and are asking these types of questions on a daily basis. Pierson notes, "When needs are met, decisions are made."<sup>11</sup>

Evangelistic series based upon doctrine and Adventist beliefs definitely have their place. But they should be incorporated as those being ministered to begin to more fully understand who they are in Christ and how God has brought new meaning to their life's journey. As Pierson suggests, our first and foremost response should be the immediate heart needs of the individual. This is not an argument to strip theology away from evangelism. Krish Kandiah asserts that "theology ought to be by its very nature evangelistic and evangelism ought to be by its very nature theological."<sup>12</sup> The two cannot be divorced from each other. Evangelism must always be backed up by the theology of the church, performed within the belief systems of the church.

## Conclusion

Evangelism is a powerful tool only when the

Holy Spirit has been invited and is leading. This does not suggest that as humans, we ignore our call to be prepared. We have no reason to pass up studying the world around us and to think of new and creative evangelistic means. The human heart naturally suffers from the weight of Sin. This suffering and brokenness cannot be healed solely by doctrine or theology. Healing comes when there is recognition that the heart is broken and is in need of something tangible. Addressing felt needs in tangible ways opens up the heart, providing the knowledge of who people are in Jesus Christ. This is what Jesus did with the Samaritan woman, which in turn brought many who were searching for meaning in their lives. People are just waiting for it to be introduced in a relevant manner.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup>Bosch, David Jacobus, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, American Society of Missiology Series No. 16. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1991.
- <sup>2</sup>Baker, Kenneth L., Burdick, Donald W., and Kenneth Boa. *Zondervan NASB Study Bible*. Grand Rapids, MI.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1999.
- <sup>3</sup>Pierson, Robert D. *Needs-Based Evangelism: Becoming a Good Samaritan Church*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2006.
- <sup>4</sup>Frost, Rob. *Sharing Jesus in a New Millennium*. Queensway, Bletchley: Scripture Union, 2000.
- <sup>5</sup>Pierson.
- <sup>6</sup>Heath, Elaine A. *The Mystic Way of Evangelism: A Contemplative Vision for Christian Outreach*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008.
- <sup>7</sup>See John 4.
- <sup>8</sup>Henderson, David W. *Culture Shift: Communicating God's Truth to Our Changing World*. Grand Rapids, MI.: Baker Books, 1998.
- <sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*
- <sup>10</sup>Frost.
- <sup>11</sup>Pierson.
- <sup>12</sup>Kandiah, Krish. "Lesslie Newbigin's Contribution to a Theology of Evangelism," *Transformation* (02653788) 24.1, 2007.

