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Need-Oriented Evangelism: Encountering, Embracing, and Experiencing God

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Abstract

*This article provides a fresh perspective on evangelism by reflecting a belief in the Triune God--the source of saving truth and loving community. Mission is part of God's nature; he is the ultimate Missionary. Mission happens naturally whenever children of God intentionally invite and facilitate God's presence. Over time, the word "evangelism" has become contaminated by myths, a false understanding of God, and unpleasant religious experiences and practices. Genuine evangelism addresses the most burning issues of people's lives and should be treated as such. True evangelism involves caring about, praying for, and sharing with people. The practical part of this article introduces three **Es** of evangelism (**e**ncountering, **e**mbracing, and **e**xperiencing) that correspond to the three colors of Light, as introduced in Color Your World with Natural Church Development (Schwarz, 2005).*

Note: Parts of this essay have been published in *The Triune God Reflected in Church Life and Health: A Trinitarian Compass for Church Leaders* by the authors (NCD Publishers, 2023).

But in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect.

- 1 Peter 3:15 (ESV)

What does need-oriented evangelism mean? Mike Mazzalongo (2014) has described it as evangelism that “encourages each Christian to use their gifts and resources to serve non-Christians with whom they have a relationship and see to it that they hear the Gospel and create that all-important connection to the local church.” Christian Schwarz (2005), the founder of Natural Church Development, suggests that there are three core components of need-oriented evangelism: prayer, caring, and sharing. While any church can easily incorporate one or maybe even two of these aspects into its evangelistic efforts, it is only when all three are present that evangelism is truly “need-oriented.”

My (Petr) closest personal experience with need-oriented evangelism is not connected with an evangelism series or a campaign preceded by a felt-needs seminar (such as a seminar to stop smoking, stress-relieving seminar, parenting seminar, etc.), but instead having fun with youth. When we had a small church plant meeting for worship, my wife and I encouraged our three teenage sons to invite their friends. Many of their friends who had grown up in a church were leaving, and the boys had a whole list of reasons why their secular friends would not fit into church life. “Okay,” I said, “Well, why not try having your own church meetings?” Eventually, my sons agreed, provided I would be there to support them.

After my oldest son (who was 17 at the time) and his friend Pavel (who had grown up atheist) were baptized, along with two other young ladies, they took this task seriously. They renamed their pop-punk band from “Fake City” to “Home for Real,” and their occasional concerts in rock clubs became outreach events. Before we knew it, they were involved in a variety of different activities, exercises, and ministries—all focused on engaging young people. For example, they hosted a church sleepover event in our outreach center; on other occasions, they organized a church service on top of a high building or in someone’s backyard. After their “church time,” they participated in a “free hug” campaign, offering hugs to people on the street or randomly asking people about their spiritual needs or experiences. One year on Christmas Day, the group prepared sack lunches and shared them with the homeless, trying to apply Jesus’s teachings.

Interestingly, around half of the kids in the group had not grown up in Christian homes, and many of them lived with only one biological parent.

Learning from the Bible was a new experience for them; belonging to a group of caring peers with whom they could have fun and having access to “a pastor for atheists” who would support, mentor, and pray for them as needed turned out to be the closest to “need-oriented evangelism” I have ever experienced. About a dozen of these young people were baptized in the first few years. Although some stopped being actively engaged in “church” after they moved away and the “youth generation” group was no longer available for them, at least they had experienced a sense of belonging. Moreover, this customized church experience provided my children and their church peers with reasons to not abandon the church completely when they became adults.

Pavel, the young man who had been baptized on the same day as my son, later completed a master’s degree in theology at Charles University in Prague and is currently serving as a social media pastor. His online ministry has drawn the attention of young people—many who have expressed their desire to meet in person. As I am writing this, Pavel’s church plant is preparing to have its first official weekend worship. I praise God for opening my heart to these young people who taught me what need-oriented evangelism is, and how sharing, prayer, and caring work together.

Evangelism for Everybody?

Our loving God is a sending God who sends to save and to transform. Because of who he is, he desires to work with us and through us in his mission. Evangelism, therefore, is an inevitable part of God’s Kingdom and its expansion. (Think of Jesus comparing God’s Kingdom to a grain of mustard seed or to leavened bread in Luke 13:18–21.) Most Christians have some idea of how evangelism is supposed to happen; after all, Jesus gave us the Great Commission in Matthew 28:18–20. What we often forget is that “the Great Commission is not a problem to be faced, nor an obligation to be fulfilled. It is not a duty to perform, but a possibility to be explored. In mission, we discover what God can do. Often Christians operate out of a sense of duty, but there is much better motivation than that” (Edgar, 2004, p. 193).

Should all believers be involved in evangelism? Well, it depends on what we mean by this word. Evangelism is not just a task for professionals; it is not simply a matter of telling people about God or an annual event, and it is definitely not us doing God a “favor.” In reality, evangelism is God doing a favor for us. He wants us to experience him as the Triune God—the foundation, basis, authority, mandate, as well as fuel, for mission and evangelism. With that said, the key element is to cooperate with God (to let him do his work) by simply doing what he has asked us to do. “God

wants to work through his people so that we can share in . . . His missionary love” (Edgar, 2004, p. 193).

What, then, is our role? Our part is more than you think. I like how Dickson frames it in his book *The Best Kept Secret of Christian Mission*—that evangelism is to promote the Gospel with more than our lips; it takes our prayers, our money, the works of the church, and our actions. We can promote the gospel by being friends with sinners, in daily conversations, as well as through clear presentations of the message (Dickson, 2013). Rosenberger (2007) writes:

We have more opportunity to witness to the living Lord . . . than we recognize in our day-to-day lives . . . A role has been assigned to us . . . God has set us on fire that the world might watch us burn with goodness, compassion, truthfulness, righteousness, justice, generosity of spirit, and peace. God has set us on fire that, in burning with the Spirit of God yet not being consumed, the world might find its way toward the light and warmth of dwelling in communion with God. Nothing could be better than that . . . This is the ultimate joy that Jesus Christ came to bring, and brought abundantly. That abundance for all would mean scarcity for none. That every last person is caught up in this embrace and no one is left behind. That nothing should separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. (p. 117)

Along the same lines, Schwarz reminds us that healthy evangelism is need-oriented, a process of helping people not only to be saved to eternal life but to answer the key questions they have and reckon with the most burning issues of their life (Schwarz, 2005).

When Evangelism Goes Wrong

I am sure you know the story of Jonah the prophet; his story, especially the part about being swallowed by big fish, is a very popular children’s Bible story. However, let’s look at this story from a slightly different perspective, examining Jonah as an evangelist. Now, Jonah did not like the idea of evangelism at all. Being a prophet to deliver God’s messages to Jonah’s own people was doable, but when he was asked to travel out of his own country to share God’s message with strangers, Jonah basically refused. We do not know what preceded boarding the boat; we do know, however, that Jonah decided to play hide and seek with God and headed in the opposite direction.

All this, even though God had made the job quite easy for him. Jonah did not need to nurture the soil of their hearts first, get to know the people,

build relational bridges with them, or gain their confidence. His task was simply to declare God’s judgment on them—literally announce a death sentence—nothing more, nothing less. But Jonah was not up for the task. It took the miracle of a torrential storm, being tossed in the sea, being rescued by a big fish, and three days in deep darkness for Jonah to agree to do what God had asked.

As it turned out, Jonah’s delivery of God’s message was exactly what the people of Nineveh needed. Indeed, God’s love touched their hearts, and the harsh words of judgment brought them to their senses. Once Jonah, the foreign evangelist, was long gone (camping on a hill nearby, smugly watching for the city to be destroyed), the people of Nineveh took it from there and did the rest of evangelism themselves. They cared for each other and shared God’s message among themselves with a unanimous and prayer-filled response, covering themselves with sackcloth and turning away from their sins.

This story demonstrates how God was able to turn Jonah’s disastrous evangelistic attempt (or the lack thereof) into an amazing missional movement, resulting in societal transformation. How encouraging! God is in charge of evangelism, not us. What is discouraging is that Jonah did not want to save others; he is an example of a religiously blind person who could not see the big picture, even after all the drama God made. Perhaps he thought that God’s message was only for “good” people; he did want to get dirty by involving himself with strangers and heathens. In the end, Jonah was angry at God when He showed mercy and compassion to the Ninevites—a true reflection of the state of his own sinful heart.

People Matter to God—Not Just Evangelism

Communication is not just what we say, but also how it is perceived by others and what they take away from it. Jonah did not care about the last part. Unfortunately, the same is true today. Some Christians assume that once a biblical truth is shared, the mission is accomplished. In Jonah’s case, those to whom he evangelized took the rest of the process into their hands and finished the job. Jonah could not have cared less about helping the people to repent, but God did. This story provides a vivid example of what happens when the Gospel is not only proclaimed, but the recipients of the good news understand the meaning of the message and respond.

If simply delivering the message was all that mattered, why would Jesus endanger himself by eating with sinners? Why would He play with children, feed the hungry, heal the sick, resurrect the dead? Jesus interacted with others, served people, spoke the truth about God, invited people to follow Him, and never left His followers alone. He “mingled with

people as one who desired their good. He showed sympathy for them, ministered to their needs, and won their confidence. Then He invited them, ‘Follow Me’” (White, 1942, p. 143).

Evangelism in the ever-changing context of the world gets quite tricky; often, by the time a new successful evangelistic model becomes recognized and adopted, a shift is needed. The context changes, and our method of evangelism loses its impact because the next generation was “born in the context in which we no longer live” (Brown, 2013, p. 35). How does your church assess the needs of the local community? “Our understanding of evangelism must reconnect with the realities of our environment” (Brown, 2013, p. 47). Jesus did not memorize evangelistic formulas to use regardless of the situation. In addition to knowing the Scriptures by heart, Jesus was a master at reading people’s minds, understanding their life situations, and responding to their needs, both immediate as well as ultimate.

The Three Colors of Need-Oriented Evangelism

From Jesus’s example, we see that healthy evangelism reflects the Triune God and needs to be integrated. I propose evangelism takes a process of encountering, embracing, and experiencing God. I have seen great efforts to care for people go to waste, without any intentional connection to pray for them or share the Gospel with them in meaningful ways. If being good citizens, being honest, and engaging in acts of service in the community is an end in itself—not connected naturally to other “colors” of evangelism—God’s triune mission is not complete.

The color green of evangelism is characterized by caring, facilitating encountering with God as the King, Creator, and Father who “makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust” (Matt. 5:45). This happens when someone’s needs are met in a special way. Helping the poor, the oppressed, refugees, widows, orphans, the homeless, or those from broken marriages (just to name a few) means simply obeying God’s blueprint (Micah 6:8). Caring happens when we offer acceptance to the rejected, when we mingle with people we would not usually mingle with, and when we do it with God’s love in our hearts, in the name of Jesus, and through the power of the Holy Spirit in us. “Our social involvement has evangelistic consequences as we bear witness to the transforming grace of Jesus Christ” (Edgar, 2004, p. 196). Caring communicates the Gospel (often non-verbally), particularly to those who do not know God. However, if caring is left on its own without sharing or without praying, it is not fully evangelism. After all, “service is communication, and the message to be communicated is the love of God” (Brown, 2013, p. 113).

The color red of evangelism, characterized by sharing, allows us to

embrace God through the teaching of His Word, through ministry, and by following the example of Jesus Christ. Those who teach and preach the Gospel may have the impression that they are doing “real” evangelism. The importance of sharing the Gospel, receiving the Word of God, and understanding the teaching of the Scriptures should not be minimized. In my own (painful) experience, I have seen how a lack of teaching from the Scripture has led those who initially were excited to encounter God’s love through caring and feeling God (e.g., through music) to be attracted to the New Age movement, esoteric teachings, or even spiritism. Making disciples for Christ is essential. “Those who respond to the Spirit will be led towards Christ and will come to know the Father” (Edgar, 2004, p. 168). Evangelism is a process that has “social consequences as we call people to love and repentance in all areas of life” (Edgar, 2004, p. 196).

The color blue of evangelism, characterized by praying, leads people to experience God through the powerful gifts and fruit of the Holy Spirit. The role of the Holy Spirit cannot be overestimated. Only God sees through us and knows our deepest thoughts and needs. “It is only through Jesus we can come to know God. Jesus leads us to the Father and sends us the Spirit” (Edgar, 2004, p. 181). As we pray, the Holy Spirit handles the convicting, cleansing, healing (emotional, relational, spiritual, and physical), and, ultimately, transforming. Evangelism without prayer, without God touching our hearts, without the intimate relational attachment, is incomplete. The Spirit creates a deep connection and bond with the Body of Christ and the desire to surrender and serve God. This is how you can experience a foretaste of the heavenly Kingdom on earth. Thus, our mandate as participants in the community of Christ “is to proclaim, support, and serve” (Grenz, 1998, p. 226).

As we conclude this section, I would like to share a snippet from Nissan’s (1999) book *Beyond Maintenance to Mission*.

First, we pay attention to the God whose rule Jesus proclaimed at the heart of his message . . . Second . . . it is the risen Jesus Christ who is still alive and ready to meet us when we gather together in worship . . . Third . . . while our justification is solely by grace through faith in Christ, the Holy Spirit continues to enliven the church with gifts freshly incarnated in the lives of believers. (p. 24)

What Do the Three Colors of Need-Oriented Evangelism Look Like in My Church?

As mentioned above, three-colored evangelism is not just about sharing. It includes *embracing* the Gospel and praying with/for the new disciples

as they *experience* God's transforming power; it also involves caring for people, helping to facilitate their *encounters* with God. The American Natural Church Development survey found between 2008 and 2018 that close to four out of five respondents (78.6%) agreed to a great or very great extent that their church tries to help those in need (specifically through food, clothing, education, counsel, etc.). That is an encouraging number! However, this outreach is not always done intentionally with the goal of having people encounter God.

During my doctoral research overseas, I interviewed pastors of various denominations. When asking about evangelism, one well-educated pastor of a mainline church got upset with me; he told me that it was "God's business" to bring people to his kingdom, and we should not mess with his work. He felt that our part is simply to live honestly and truthfully. I specifically remember him saying: "Yes, we should help people in their needs, but we should not impose our beliefs on them. God will bring people to the church according to his will."

The word evangelism has become loaded with different meanings (both positive and negative) for different types of churches. However, in many cases, we do not know exactly what the word "evangelism" means. As a result, I believe that most of us embrace only one aspect of the Triune God, favoring one side or color of Him over the others. Evangelism is incomplete and often ineffective when we focus only on our favored color and do not focus on or cooperate with the Triune God as a whole. Responding to God as he is revealed in Scripture means being mission-minded.

Ask your local church folks: Is evangelism such a positive experience that everyone wants to be part of it—from the oldest to the youngest? If not, perhaps something is missing. One in three respondents (32.2%) in the American Natural Church Development survey stated that in their church, they hardly or not at all encourage new Christians to become involved in evangelism immediately. You may argue this is how it should be, that new members should mature first and grow in the knowledge of Scripture. Yet if evangelism in your church is reserved for only the spiritually mature, those who have been trained, or those who have the spiritual gift of evangelism, your church is missing the point of evangelism.

To be involved in evangelism is a way to be evangelized. By helping others, people help themselves. Remember the three colors and dimensions of evangelism: to sense God's presence (*encounter*), to get to know Him (*embrace*), and to hear His voice and enjoy listening to/obeying Him (*experience*).

One in four (24.5%) American Natural Church Development survey respondents stated that the evangelistic activities in their church are

hardly or not at all relevant for their friends and family who do not yet know Jesus Christ. Is evangelism in your church boring or wearing people out? What does it take in the context of your local church to make evangelism something natural - so much so that everyone desires to be part of it?

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