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# Evangelism for *Non-Evangelists*

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*Sharing the Gospel Authentically*

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bridges between the mainline and evangelical branches of the church, and Dr. George Hunsberger, who selflessly dedicated his first weeks of retirement to reading and providing me feedback on the manuscript. Dr. Dan Reid, my editor at IVP, has also been tremendously helpful, often figuring out what I wanted to say and finding ways to express it better than I could. His editing and insight have been invaluable.

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## Introduction

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*T*his past year I had conversations about religion with several people. These individuals included a humanist who leads worship in an Episcopalian congregation; a person who grew up in the church, is married to a pagan of the same sex and has begun questioning his own Christian beliefs; a pantheist who is married to an atheist; a member of a liberal mainline Protestant denomination who is in full agreement with the progressive political and theological agendas brought forward in that denomination; and a self-described evangelical who is struggling to find a place as a church planter within a mainline denomination that has been marked more by institutional upkeep than creative outreach. Perhaps it is not surprising that a professor of evangelism would carry on conversations about faith with such a variegated group of people. It may be more surprising to learn what these people shared in common: they were all students in seminary seeking degrees that would give them the academic credentials to be professional leaders in the church. This is the reality of teaching in a mainline denominational seminary today.

These students also had another point in common: they did not want to take my evangelism course. Many of my students find my class to be one of the least palatable aspects of moving through the seminary's curriculum. However, because of ordination and graduation requirements, they swallowed hard and registered.

Along these same lines, a good friend of mine who is the director of evangelism in a major Protestant denomination was telling me about a training session she had held for clergy and lay church leaders. Even though the word "evangelism" is in her title and she was invited to lead this session, she had debated whether to use the word "evangelism" in her presentation.

She was concerned that too many people would find the term off-putting and it would get in the way of her teaching.

If you are a seminary student taking an evangelism course or church leader tasked with developing an evangelism strategy for your church, perhaps you can relate to these experiences. You have entered into this endeavor with a sense of foreboding and uncertainty about what comes next. Visions of being accosted by aggressive people passing out tracts on the street corner, awkward silences as the pastor waits for someone to come forward during an altar call, folks knocking on doors to share their beliefs and literature—all done in the name of Jesus—may well be swimming through your head.

Or perhaps you have had positive experiences with evangelism and are braced to have your personal beliefs deconstructed. You are worried that the professor and your fellow students or church members will sneer at the charismatic experience you had under a faith healer or while attending the rally of a televangelist. Maybe you struggle with the fact that you are one of the people knocking on doors, leading altar calls or handing out tracts and that you do these things precisely because you love Jesus and want others to know the mighty gift of salvation he offers.

If you are teaching about evangelism, you know you have specific material to cover. There are certain theories and practices you have determined are essential for students to know. At the same time you recognize that you must address the potent emotional responses students experience. You are both the ticket agent providing what is necessary to progress to the next step in ministry preparation and the porter who must help students check the often considerable amount of baggage they have brought along for the trip.

This book is written with all of you in mind. As a student who had to take the course in evangelism to receive his MDiv and now as a professor who teaches that course in a seminary, I understand the concerns brought to the table by those in both roles. I have suffered through the social awkwardness and sometimes offensiveness of poorly done evangelism. I have also knocked on doors, shared my faith on street corners and invited friends to pray the sinner's prayer. I appreciate the voices of those who come to the course with both positive and negative experiences of evangelism.

It is because I have experienced evangelism in all these ways—as learner, as teacher, as practitioner, as practiced upon, as grateful recipient and as

uncomfortable resister—that I have written this book. Evangelism is a subject that cannot be studied apart from the experiences people bring to it. And each person's experience of evangelism is legitimate. To ignore our experiences as we enter the study of evangelism is to miss a key ingredient we need to learn the subject well. We cannot practice evangelism without putting our whole selves into it. To do this would be to commit one of the worst mistakes possible in the understanding and practice of evangelism: to be inauthentic.

We all know what it feels like when someone is trying too hard to win our approval. If the person is offering something worthwhile, it will be evident in how they relate to us. If the person constantly seeks to cover up their true self to make what they are offering seem more appealing, that is disconcerting. Most of us can smell a phony a mile away, and we take off once we catch a whiff. This is the same for individuals and for entire organizations. No one wants to join an organization that has a great façade but no substance on the inside.

The same is true in evangelism. Only when we offer the good news of Jesus Christ as that which has touched and transformed our lives does it become meaningful and interesting to others. Only when we are authentic to who we are in Christ is evangelism done well.

We can do our best to practice evangelism by learning the so-called best practices propounded by evangelism gurus. A great many local churches have taken this route—putting up good signage in buildings, maintaining sufficient parking, making sure attendees are greeted, cleaning the restrooms until sparkling, and creating fun and welcoming children's areas. However, these strategies do not guarantee meaningful evangelism. A church—or individual—can perfect all these practices and still come across as inauthentic, even creepy. This is because the practices are shallow if they do not convey who we are and how we came to our beliefs in the good news.

I am not against excellence in our practice of evangelism. To the contrary, I think a great many Christians, local churches and even denominations do not take seriously that “we are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us” (2 Cor 5:20 NIV). As God's representatives we ought to put forward the best impression we can. However, the church's programming and facilities are often put to shame by the excellence found in the marketplace and political arena—and these are appealing for

our dollars or votes rather than the redemption of the universe. We should do better than this!

Still, our programming and facilities should not be what recommends our message to others. Jesus said people would know we were his by our love, not by our remarkable youth programs or spacious buildings. It is when we share our genuine selves with people that the good news comes through most clearly and appealingly.

In this book I take as my premise the need to approach evangelism authentically. This means I leave room for people of differing theologies and in different places in their faith journey to engage with evangelism. My goal is not to convince you to adopt a specific way of understanding or practicing evangelism (though I certainly have my own ideas about this) but to provide you with the tools to think through evangelism for yourself.

The overriding metaphor I use throughout the book to explain the process of developing authentic evangelism is that of navigation. Working with evangelism is a multistep process that requires preparation and guidance if we are to arrive safely at the intended destination. At times navigation requires us to avoid dangers lurking on the journey. At other times it requires us to pause and reflect on where we have been and where we want to go so we can chart the next leg of the voyage. In the end our hope is to arrive at an authentic understanding and practice of evangelism. This will allow us to share a message that we firmly believe is so good it is worth sharing.

This book is not a map for how to arrive at this destination. Rather, it is a guide for how to spot the difficulties ahead, how to gain a general sense of direction for the trip and how to recognize what will be useful along the way. This process is not an easy one. If you persevere, though, what you generate from the undertaking will be uniquely yours—yours to share with others.

#### A DISCLAIMER: EVANGELISM AS A BIAS

In order to navigate successfully to an authentic practice of evangelism, we need to start with clarity about what we mean by “evangelism.” As William Abraham has observed, evangelism is both descriptive and normative.<sup>1</sup> This means that those who study and practice evangelism must make statements

about how they believe the world ought to operate as well as describe the way it actually operates now. Following this insight, let me share my own definition of evangelism: Evangelism is a bias for the good news.

This is a provocative definition for three reasons. First, it uses the word “bias,” which is almost never construed as a positive thing. In the case of evangelism it raises the specter of all the judgmental evangelists who make us uneasy. “Evangelism” is a word that ends with the suffix “-ism,” though, and just like any other word that ends in “-ism,” it denotes a bias in favor of one thing and against another thing. Most “isms,” including racism, sexism and nativism, argue for one group of people over and against another group of people—one race, sex or ethnicity is preferred over all others. If evangelism is a similar “ism,” we had best stop now before we multiply further the sins of the world.

However, evangelism is not like these other “isms.” Rather than promoting one group of people over another, it declares one message over all other messages. It declares that there is supremacy to “good news,” and it rejects all other forms of news as deficient.

This brings us to the second provocative aspect of the definition. It does not assert what this good news is. This is by design. It allows space for Christians from a variety of theological traditions to approach evangelism.<sup>2</sup> Each of us must work through our beliefs about God to determine what we hold to be the central good news of the Christian faith, and no Christian theological tradition is disbarred from this process.

Christians have long claimed that there is a central message about God’s goodness, often referred to as the “gospel” (which literally means “good news”). An enormous amount has been written about what the gospel is, much of it posted on blogs. Most of these agree that the gospel at least deals with God’s good nature, the human need for God’s goodness and God reaching out through Jesus Christ to invite people into God’s goodness.

While it is up to each of us to navigate through these ideas about God’s nature and human need so we can construct our own articulation of the

<sup>2</sup>By “theological traditions,” I mean any organized understanding of the Christian faith (e.g., evangelicalism, Pentecostalism, liberation theology, process theology). I use this term in place of the more common “theologies” to make a clear demarcation between the practice of theological reflection we engage in and the preexisting fruits of that reflection we use to inform our beliefs. We will discuss this later on in the book.

<sup>1</sup>William J. Abraham, *The Logic of Evangelism* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1989), 11.

gospel, the insights of N. T. Wright are helpful here. First, he reminds us that “the Christian message is about good news, not good advice.” He explains that this good news does more than just prod us to consider going to heaven instead of going to hell. Rather, it “affects everything: how we understand our relationship to God, the future, our responsibilities as a church and as disciples, and much more.”<sup>3</sup>

Wright goes on to suggest that any formulation of the gospel must include three elements: something has happened, something will happen and we are now living in a time between what did happen and what will happen. This was the pattern of what Jesus announced in reference to the coming of the kingdom of God (the kingdom has come; the kingdom will be consummated by the Son of Man; repent in preparation for its fulfillment) and of what the disciples announced about Jesus (the Son of God was incarnate, crucified and resurrected in the person of Jesus of Nazareth; Jesus will come again in glory; repent and enter the community of the church).<sup>4</sup>

My own view of the good news accepts the incarnation, death and bodily resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ and looks forward to Jesus returning to establish the kingdom of God in glory. Until then, I believe that God is redeeming the world through Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit and that we are invited to participate in that redemption process. I write this not to convince you that this is the only way to articulate the good news but so that you understand where I am coming from in this text.

One reason I articulate the good news this way is that it makes one point very clear: Evangelism does not reject any person. What it rejects are messages and powers that would deny people the ability to share in God’s gracious redemption through Jesus Christ. Evangelism denounces whatever stands between people and God’s redeeming work, even if it is the church or Christians that form this hindrance.

This view of the gospel also proscribes any action that is angry or condemning from being evangelism. People who pass judgment on other people in the name of Jesus are not doing evangelism. They may be making a

statement about their faith, but they are not grounding that statement in good news. Rather, they are hindering people from hearing the good news by stating that, for whatever reason, various people are not capable of entering God’s redemptive work through Jesus Christ. This is the opposite of evangelism. It navigates any attempt at evangelism right off a cliff.

Whatever your definition of “good news” may be, construct it in such a way that no person is on the negative end of the bias it entails. Evangelism should reject that which is harmful and hurtful to people but never people themselves. This is not to suggest that evangelism will always be easy for people to hear or accept. The bias we articulate about what God is doing may well conflict with an existing set of beliefs that a person holds. This, however, is not a rejection of the person.

The third reason this definition of evangelism is provocative is that it does not reduce evangelism to a specific set of activities. There are two perspectives on what practices fall under the rubric of evangelism. Some scholars state that evangelism includes only those practices that involve inviting people to receive the good news of God. Others claim that evangelism entails both the invitation and, for those who have accepted the invitation, practices of formation that shape people as Christians. With this definition, I declare my membership in the latter group.

A bias is not just an opinion or an intellectual position but a claim that shapes those who hold it. Consider this: A capitalist is not someone who holds a specific view on how to engage in economic activity but who can just as easily participate in communist activities while disagreeing intellectually. No, a capitalist is someone who has been formed into a series of beliefs about how to value goods, labor and services. For a capitalist to take part in a communist system would require either coercion or conversion to overcome how the person was formed as a capitalist. Likewise, to define evangelism as a bias means that those who accept the good news must be formed by the good news. In addition, since the good news points to the eternally good God, this formation never has an end. Even those who have long been adherents of the good news can continue to be evangelized.

If evangelism is a bias, it demands that we who study and practice it be intentional and discerning in our tasks. Biases that have been deployed for evil have caused deep pain in this world. We do not want to add to this pain

<sup>3</sup>N. T. Wright, *Simply Good News: Why the Gospel Is News and What Makes It Good* (New York: HarperOne, 2015), 5.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 17.

either on purpose or by our carelessness in allowing evangelism to be used as a weapon against others. The work we are about to embark on requires our full attention.

### TOOLS FOR THINKING AUTHENTICALLY ABOUT EVANGELISM

There are four areas we need to move through to navigate evangelism. First is articulating our starting point, which is our core belief in the goodness of God that motivates us to evangelize. Second is theologically reflecting on our starting point. Third is becoming contextually aware. Fourth is developing creative practices as the concrete manifestation of the good news. Doing all of this requires us to steer through a complex course of beliefs, traditions and cultural forces to arrive at our destination of an authentic understanding and practice of evangelism.

It is important to recognize that none of these four areas is inconsequential. All are interconnected and all are necessary. If an evangelist, anxious to save souls, jumps straight to telling people about Jesus without first reflecting on why she believes what she does, she may well run into serious problems when her listeners challenge those beliefs. Likewise, if a church committee spends hours perfecting a statement of the church's theology but focuses only on maintaining the church's institutional structure with no concern for the community, it has failed to practice evangelism. Neither of these entities has navigated through the full route of evangelism. Both have foundered before reaching the destination of engaging in authentic evangelistic practice.

The following formula provides an alternative way of understanding how the four parts relate to one another:

$$\text{Starting Point} + \text{Theological Reflection} + \text{Contextual Awareness} = \text{Creative Practice}$$

In this formula, when the starting point is summed together with theological reflection and contextual awareness, it creates the capacity for us to develop creative evangelistic practices. The whole of the equation—starting point, theological reflection, contextual awareness and creative practice—is how we navigate evangelism. We will spend most of this book discussing the four parts of navigating evangelism and how they interact with each other.

### IMPLICATIONS

There are several implications to approaching the study of evangelism this way. The first and most important is that it makes evangelism accessible and practicable for a variety of people, regardless of their theological traditions. Although evangelism is often associated with evangelical, fundamentalist and Pentecostal traditions, navigating evangelism in the way I suggest allows for people from any theological tradition to engage in it.

Opening the door for various theological traditions also opens the door for people within those traditions to recast their favored practices as evangelistic. For example, the liberation theologian can point to living in community with the poor as an authentic way of practicing the good news,<sup>5</sup> just as the Pentecostal can point to a ministry of deliverance from evil spirits and the evangelical can point to developing neighborhood Bible studies as authentic evangelistic practices.

This widens the scope of evangelism and makes it a bridge-building practice rather than a divisive one.<sup>6</sup> This bridge building occurs first within the church. Those of us who hold to different theological traditions can stop avoiding one another or seeing each other as working counter to the true purposes of God—this model of evangelism allows us to better understand the hopes, beliefs and practices of our brothers and sisters in Christ.

My hope is that this realization will lead us to stop seeing our particular brands of evangelism as the only way for others to experience the redemptive work of God through Jesus Christ. Instead we will see our work as complemented by the work of other Christians who approach evangelism differently. The Pentecostal, for example, can value the demand for systemic justice brought by the liberationist while the liberationist can value how the Pentecostal trusts the power of the Holy Spirit to transform lives and cultures. Far from making us withdraw from one another out of concern that we will either be offended or cause offense, evangelism becomes an opportunity for us to share our deepest beliefs with one another frankly and respectfully.

<sup>5</sup>Priscilla Pope-Levison provides insightful analysis on the intersection of evangelism and liberation theology in *Evangelization from a Liberation Perspective* (New York: Peter Lang, 1991), 159.

<sup>6</sup>The Academy for Evangelism in Theological Education dedicated its 2013 meeting to this theme of evangelism as bridge building. Some of the presentations offered at this meeting can be found in *Witness: The Journal of the Academy for Evangelism in Theological Education* 28 (2014).

This internal rapprochement paves the way for us to build bridges between those who claim the good news of Jesus Christ and those who do not. If Christians value the different ways those within the church practice evangelism, would not the church provide a richer witness to the good news of God? Those outside the church could observe Christians who love one another and who love the world by engaging in a wide variety of activities demonstrating that love.

Outside of these larger effects, navigating evangelism also helps us make sense of the proliferation of evangelism material, both scholarly and popular. From books to tracts to Internet videos to denominational resources and kits, there is no lack of material on offer. It can be difficult to get a handle on these resources because despite using the same terminology they tend to define terms differently and employ different methodologies.<sup>7</sup> The navigation model offers a quick way to grasp core ideas. What is the great hope that motivates the authors as their starting point? What theological traditions do the authors espouse? By answering these questions we can get to the heart of what the author thinks about evangelism. We can also determine whether the practices of evangelism on offer fit what is authentic to us.

Making this determination has practical value. Any number of struggling local congregations can gesture toward a pile of expensive evangelism materials they have purchased and followed over the years, to very little effect. The chief reason for this is not that there were flaws in the materials but that the activities presented were not authentic demonstrations of what the congregations believed. The inauthenticity of the practices doomed the effort from the start and left the congregation feeling even more despondent.

Likewise, congregations and pastors can use the navigation process to understand each other better. Navigating evangelism provides the basic outline for helping clergy and laity to recognize each other's hopes, theology and practices so they can find ways to work more effectively together to share the good news.

<sup>7</sup>I explored this idea in an article surveying evangelism texts published by United Methodist authors. In spite of their common denominational background, I found that they all employed different definitions of the word "evangelism," different methodologies for studying evangelism and different examples of the best practitioners of evangelism. Mark R. Teasdale, "The Contribution to Missiology by United Methodist Scholarship on Evangelism," *Missiology* 41, no. 4 (2013): 452-61.

More than understanding each other, navigating evangelism offers a way for those of us who are Christians to create our own authentic ways of practicing evangelism. This pushes back against cookie cutter models suggesting that all Christians or congregations must act or believe the same way to engage in evangelism effectively. To be authentic about the good news of God's redemption through Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit is to be effective. This approach to evangelism advocates for evangelism that is sensitive to the time and place where it is practiced and authentic to the beliefs of the Christians practicing it.

Ending the cookie cutter approach to evangelism has two other benefits. First, it helps atone for the church's past sins. That evangelism has been the site of painful encounters between the church and those it sought to incorporate into the Christian faith is undeniable. Books such as Luis Rivera's *Violent Evangelism*, which traces the evangelistic practices involved in the Spanish conquest of the New World, remind us that Christians have used the propagation of the good news as a cover for avarice and pride.<sup>8</sup> A model of evangelism that allows us to navigate our beliefs while remaining contextually sensitive demonstrates that Christians do not accept these past misdeeds. We believe in good news that is good both for the evangelist and for those hearing it for the first time.

Second, it differentiates evangelism from the slough of strong opinions found in our age of social media. We are awash in Twitter feeds, comment sections, blogs, reviewer apps and countless other means for sharing our opinions. We may be hesitant to evangelize, but a large number of people in the early twenty-first century are comfortable stating their beliefs on a great many subjects with little or no attempt to filter their thoughts, much less consider alternative perspectives or the ways their beliefs might be offensive to others.<sup>9</sup>

By navigating evangelism, we equip ourselves to eschew this kind of boorish behavior. Evangelism becomes more than just sharing our opinion; the way we share the good news becomes an embodiment of the good news.

<sup>8</sup>Luis N. Rivera, *A Violent Evangelism: The Political and Religious Conquest of the Americas* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1992).

<sup>9</sup>Os Guinness, *The Global Public Square: Religious Freedom and the Making of a World Safe for Diversity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 56.

This means we communicate in ways that are civil and considerate of others' dignity while remaining grounded in our unwavering experience of God's goodness in our own lives. Such communication is welcoming rather than condemning and invites others to consider our message rather than react with further diatribe. To Wright's point, it demonstrates that we have good news to share of an actual transformation God has made in the world and in our lives. It is not just good advice that comes from our own strongly held beliefs without any grounding in God's action.

Under the best of circumstances, evangelism is a contentious activity. Jesus was clear about this in his instructions to the disciples in Matthew 10. If we learn to navigate evangelism, at least we will be able to avoid the pitfalls that have hampered the evangelistic work of the church in the past and that diminishes the value of human thought today. At best we will offer a welcome message of hope that will be a blessing to those who hear us.

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## Chapter One

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# Evangelists Are Taught, Not Born

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A teenage boy stood in an open, trash-littered lot by a rundown liquor store. It was twilight, and the waning sun made it hard to see, though it was clear that the liquor store was doing a brisk business. Most of the patrons held their purchases in brown paper bags that they quickly inverted into their mouths as they exited the store.

The boy was not alone. He was part of a group of about twenty other teenagers who had arrived in the lot late in the afternoon. Equipped with small pamphlets explaining the gospel message through various cartoons and illustrations, the boy prayed with his collaborators, listened to the musical group that had been appointed to attract people's attention, then awaited an opportunity to share the great salvation available through Jesus Christ.

He was not idle long. Several people came to listen to the music and turned to engage in conversation with the teenagers, including one man who struck up a conversation with the boy. This was exciting for everyone in the group—it was exactly what they had hoped would take place.

Then, something unexpected happened. This boy, who had been raised in the church, who in first grade had prayed to receive Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior, who had even preached the Sunday morning service at fifteen years old and who was admired as a paragon of teenage faith within the group, froze. He was petrified with fear. He did not know what to say or how to proceed as he faced the amiable person who had begun speaking with him.

The level of shame the boy felt was immense. It was heightened when one of the younger members of the group who was known for his immaturity recognized the boy's distress and came to pick up the conversation where