

Five Mistakes We Make in Evangelism ... and How to Fix Them Marvin Bryant

Evangelism is an English word that goes back to the New Testament word *euangelizomai*, to tell good news. I'm tempted to say the #1 mistake we make in evangelism is not telling the news and the solution is to tell it! That is not very helpful, of course.

A much better approach is to equip people who are willing to share the good news. Jesus equipped the twelve before he sent them out (Matthew 10). That is the basis and purpose of *Empowering Subjects*, to equip people to change the world like Jesus. Perhaps the following instruction can be a part of equipping us to share the good news.

I won't explore all the reasons why we may be hesitant to share it. But I will say part of the problem is that we have sometimes misunderstood what the Lord has called us to. Some of what we have mistakenly thought we were called to is off-putting to almost everyone. Perhaps identifying some of those mistakes will clear some ground and open our hearts to telling the good news.

Mistake #1: Thinking we have to make other Christians to tell the good news (or thinking others are trying to make us tell the good news)

Solution: Allow the Lord of the Harvest to Send out the Workers.

In Matthew 9:35-38, Jesus says the harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. He then told us to ask the Lord of the Harvest to send out workers into his harvest field. There are two parts to his instruction. One is that it is the Lord of the Harvest who sends out the workers. I believe this is true whether it be full time missionaries and ministers or anyone else who works in the kingdom in any way. Right after Jesus said he would send out workers, he did just that—he sent out the twelve to cast out demons and tell the good news of the kingdom (Matthew 10). Then, just before he left the earth, he sent them out again, as his father had sent him (John 20:21). He has sent numerous others since (Acts 13:1-4; 26:17; Romans 10:15; 1 Corinthians 1:17).

We should not try to force others to go into the Lord's Harvest field nor should we enter it ourselves unless we believe the Lord is sending us. Workers who have not been sent by Christ have no business in the field and may do more harm than good, like a waiter or waitress who really doesn't

want to be at work. Grasping this principle relieves pressure from those who have mistakenly usurped the Lord's task of getting workers. It also relieves pressure from those who may feel forced to work. The latter can relax, pray, listen, and learn, and discern whether the Lord is calling them to be workers.

The other part of Jesus' statement in Matthew 9:38, however, tells us we do have a role in increasing the number of workers. He wants us to ask him to send them out. The word here is not the usual one for prayer. Rather, this word means to beseech, implore, entreat. ESV translates the word "pray earnestly." If we want more workers, our part is to pray earnestly for them. I urge you to add this to your regular prayers.

We should note that some of those Jesus instructed to pray for workers in Matthew 9 are the very ones he sent out as workers in Matthew 10. When we pray for workers, we may be praying for ourselves. Also, when it becomes clear that the Lord wants to send someone out as a worker, equipping will also be needed (Matthew 10 again), although I doubt that either the twelve or we will feel fully prepared before we begin.

Mistake #2: Emphasizing the wrong part of the message

Solution: Emphasize that Christ is God's anointed King

When evangelicals tell the good news, it is very common for them to place the emphasis on grace, salvation, and forgiveness. In Churches of Christ, alternately, the emphasis is often how we respond to Christ, especially in baptism. All these things are indeed a part of the message, but I'm convinced that none of them are the real heart and center of the message.

Instead, the heart of the message is that Jesus is the King (or Christ, Messiah, Lord, Son of God). Detailed Scripture study is warranted here, but let me give two brief examples. In Acts 2, the first Christian sermon, Peter explains about the coming of the Spirit, tells about the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus, argues for the truth of the resurrection, and then in v. 36 reaches the climax of his sermon, introduced by "therefore." The conclusion he draws is that *God has made Jesus both Lord and Christ*. Forgiveness, salvation and baptism are mentioned later, but those are not the point to which Peter was driving. Rather, it was the identity of Jesus.

Similarly, the short summaries of preaching the good news throughout the book of Acts regularly state it in terms of Jesus being the Christ or Messiah (5:42; 8:5, 12; 9:20; 16:31; 17:2-3, 7; 18:5; cf. Mark 1:1;

Romans 1:1-4). Even the great summary of the gospel in 1 Corinthians 15:1-5 states it in terms of “Christ” dying for our sins.

Again, more detailed study is needed, but I’m convinced that the heart of the message is that Jesus is Lord or King and that salvation is a sub-point of that. Salvation is given to those who submit to his kingship. And baptism, as well as faith and repentance, are the fitting and necessary responses to the truth that Jesus is the King.

One reason this really matters is that if we place the emphasis on salvation, we are playing up the benefits and downplaying the cost. The truth is you cannot have Jesus as Savior if you will not have him as Lord. If we emphasize the benefits and downplay the cost, we are setting people on a course to look for the best possible deal they can find for themselves for the rest of their lives. In this way, we help to create the consumer Christians who frustrate us so much.

Alternately, if we emphasize baptism or any other part of our response to the Lord, we run the risk of creating self-sufficiency that may hinder people from trusting in Christ at all.

Mistake #3: Casting the good news in the form of a sales pitch, a deal, or an offer.

Solution: Maintain its primary form of announcement, proclamation, and news.

Again, more detailed Scripture study is in order, but the most usual form of the message about Christ is that it is an *announcement* or *proclamation*. It is *news*. This is more obvious when we begin with Jesus, the one who brought the good news and first told it. Mark summarizes Jesus’ message as “*proclaiming* the good news of God,” namely, that “The kingdom of God has come near” (Mark 1:14-15). What he was doing was proclaiming news. The news was that God was about to inaugurate his reign in a new way. Jesus also said the appropriate way of responding to his proclamation was to “repent and believe the good news.” He wasn’t selling anything. He wasn’t making them an offer or a great deal. He was announcing something that God was doing. The apostles announced essentially the same message, focusing it on the King himself, Jesus.

There are several other terms used to describe the way the message was communicated in addition to “announce” or “tell good news.” For example, declare, testify, persuade, and speak are all used. Still, evangelism

is primarily a matter of announcing good news, as the word itself indicates. We must not distort the form of the message into a sales pitch or good deal. That runs the risk emptying the cross of its power or putting people's faith in human wisdom (1 Corinthians 1:17; 2:1-5), to say nothing of the fact that many of us hate the idea of trying to sell something to someone.

Mistaking the form of the message leads directly into the next mistake.

Mistake #4: Thinking we have to convert people

Solution: Stay in our lane and let God do the converting.

In order for conversion to happen, the good news must enter good soil and our good God must do his work of giving new birth. You may be able to pressure or manipulate someone into confessing Christ or getting baptized, but they will not be converted unless the gospel has come to them, their heart is open to receive it, they respond authentically, and God works to give them new life.

There is a way to minister to where the result will sometimes be that Christ writes a letter on open people's hearts, by the Holy Spirit (2 Corinthians 3:3). But there is also a way to minister where people merely get dunked.

Applying the notion of "closing the sale" to evangelism is blasphemy. There is no sale to be closed. When conversion does take place, it is a work of God in a person with an open heart. Our work is to announce good news, not to convert. This, too, removes pressure.

Concerning this mistake and the previous one, we should not conclude that our work is of little significance or do it in a casual, routine manner. The occasional use of the word "persuade" shows there is room for doing so as we announce the news. What's more, both Jesus and Paul worked really hard to communicate the gospel far and wide. We should care greatly and speak earnestly and often. It's just that we leave the converting to God and His Spirit. "So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow" (1 Corinthians 3:7).

Mistake #5: Separating the announcement of the kingdom from two other key aspects of Jesus' ministry.

Solution: Announce the kingdom, demonstrate the kingdom, *and* explain the way of life in the kingdom.

Some Christians, especially in former days, have been very interested in telling others the gospel but not so interested in helping them with their needs and problems. They want to tell but not show. Today we often have the opposite problem. Many want to serve and help, but they are very hesitant to speak. They are willing to show but not tell.

There is a third extreme as well, related to teaching. Far too often we have brought people to the Lord but then failed to teach them the way of life in the kingdom afterward. Alternately, when we are not telling anyone the good news, we develop a somewhat opposite problem. We may teach, re-teach and over-teach people who have been Christians for decades and already heard most everything from the Bible. This, without ever praying for and equipping workers to bring new subjects to the King.

Jesus' ministry corrects all these mistakes. His work shows us a balanced model of declaring the kingdom (evangelism), demonstrating the kingdom (helping people), and describing the kingdom (teaching)(Matthew 9:35). These are not mere coincidental ways of describing Jesus' ministry. They are significant, as is clear not only from seeing Jesus do all three of them but also from Matthew twice using these three phrases to summarize Jesus' ministry (Matthew 4:23; 9:35).

Showing without telling does not save. Telling without showing may not convince. Doing both without teaching and explaining may not last. If we are going to follow Jesus, we will demonstrate, declare, and describe the kingdom.

So, instead of twisting arms, we are called to pray earnestly that the Lord of the Harvest would send out workers. We are called to announce the kingship of Christ instead of peddling salvation or pushing baptism. We stay in our lane by proclaiming the news, demonstrating its truthfulness in our lives, and teaching the right way of life in the kingdom, and we refuse to interfere with God's work of "making it grow." In this way, we are not only faithful to what God has told us in Scripture, we take a lot of pressure off ourselves and invite the work of God through us and among us. The world, the church, and we ourselves have everything to gain from our doing so.