

For I Am Not Ashamed: Speaking of Jesus on Campus

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What is Good Evangelism?

Is evangelism important? Well--

- If you don't care whether God's love seems real to your friends,
- If you think religious beliefs are like noses, everyone has one and beneath the surface they all work the same way,
- If you seldom meet anyone who is confused, afraid, hopeless, or in need of direction,
- If you don't think Jesus has much to say to our affluent, technologically sophisticated society,
- If you believe people become followers of Jesus when the God sprinkles magic pixie dust on them,
- If you are satisfied when the church merely mirrors and preserves the values of the society around it.

Then, no, you probably don't see much need for evangelism. On the other hand, if you believe--

- that the value you put at the center of your life makes a difference in how you deal with everything from dating to death,
- that the life and teachings of Jesus offer the world something distinctive,
- that people gathered in Christ's name can make a difference in the world,
- that the best things in life should be shared instead of hoarded,
- that it's hard to understand and embrace a vision until someone models it.

You might agree that evangelism is important.

Every Christian can and should be an evangelist. If that assertion seems a little too sweeping, perhaps it's because our culture treats Christian practice as a leisure activity, in the same category with fishing or mountain biking. Such a societal attitude often makes us reluctant to do anything that might be seen as imposing our "hobby" on others, even when we find great fulfillment in the beliefs and activities of our faith.

Jesus does not treat religious life as something we do in our spare time. He assumes our Christian identity will be at the core of who we are, like the hub to which every spoke of the wheel is connected. Jesus expects that when we catch his vision, we will be so excited we will want others to catch it. That effort to help others catch the vision is what we mean by "evangelism", "witnessing", or "sharing our faith" (different phrases for essentially the same thing). It's true that some

people seem particularly good at talking about their faith, but if you know how to recommend a restaurant you already have enough skill to be an evangelist.

So what are we talking about? Let's start with two simple definitions. Evangelism is:

“Proclamation, invitation, and hospitality in the spirit of Jesus Christ.”

“Inviting others into a relationship with Jesus Christ and the community, which forms disciples in His name.”

In these definitions, we find key elements of good evangelism.

GOSPEL GROUNDED

If you were inviting people to a party at your place, you would make sure they had all the necessary information: date, time, directions, and type of party. Your invitation would express more than a vague desire to have folks come over sometime; you would be as specific as possible. Communicating what it means to be a disciple of Jesus involves giving people the basic information they need to form a judgment about this person we call “Lord.” Most of that information is found in the Bible, and in the four gospels in particular. An evangelist tells the story of Jesus, shares His teachings, and explains why the church believes His death and resurrection are so important. Evangelism is far more than giving others information—but it is not less. At some point in your interaction with someone whom you hope will become a disciple, you need to tell the important parts of Jesus’ story. That is what we mean by *proclamation*: speaking of what God has done in Jesus Christ.

INTENTIONAL

Ask many Christians how they do evangelism and you will often get a response such as, “I just try to live in a Christian way and wait for people to ask why my life is so distinctive.” Although we certainly want our lives to reflect our faith, a probing response to this evangelistic strategy might be, “And when was the last time that happened?” Occasionally someone makes the jump from observing an unspoken faith to inquiry about its origin, but not very often. A distinctive life is a great advertisement for the faith you confess, but unless you are willing to make the connection between your faith and behavior explicit, there is no necessary reason for others to see the relationship. Good evangelism is sensitive to the right time and place for speaking explicitly about the “hope that is within us” (I Peter 3:15). But if that time never seems to arrive, you are not likely to be an effective evangelist. *Invitation* is more than the stereotypical question, “brother, are you saved?” There are many ways to move the conversation to an explicit discussion of the Christian way of living in the world, but good evangelists take the initiative to choose at least one.

ATTENTIVE

How would you react if you went into a shoe store and asked for size six sandals and the clerk insisted on bringing you box after box of size ten running shoes? Absurd? Of course. You would undoubtedly decide that the clerk had no interest in your needs or desires, and you would leave without buying anything. Sometimes our approach to sharing our faith is equally flawed. A canned presentation assumes “one sizes fits all”, but no two people have exactly the same history or concerns.

Good evangelists are concerned about framing the Christian story in a way, which is attuned to the needs of a specific person at a specific time. Evangelism is about establishing *relationships*: between you and the person you are talking to, between Jesus and that person, between that person and the community of faith. If you are going to be an effective evangelist, you have to take the time to know the hopes and the hurts, the doubts and desires, the longings and loves that drive the person with whom you are dealing. Taking the time to understand another is a lot more complex than delivering a prefab presentation (relationships tend to be messy that way), but the reward is that you communicate authentic care as you speak of your faith.

ROOTED IN THE COMMUNITY

Genuine concern for the individual with whom you are talking is essential to good evangelism, but the invitation you offer is to more than a private relationship with Jesus. When the culture around us does not share our priorities and values, it is hard to maintain our identity as Christians. We are like persons trying to cross a raging stream while the water’s constant pressure threatens to push us over. We need a community of people who can support us in our walk, who will pick us up when we fall down and encourage us to start again. This community, usually called the church, is also important because it’s the place to ask hard questions. Few of life’s important choices are simple. Under pressure we easily lose a sense of perspective. In confusing times, others in the community of faith can serve as guides, wise questioners, and people, who speak a true, if sometimes painful, word. Evangelism should never separate Christ and the *community that gathers in His name*. Christianity without the church easily degenerates into self-indulgence, and a church without Christ at its center is merely a club.

INTENT ON TRANSFORMATION

Evangelism is not about getting saved—if by “saved” we mean repeating a formula which functions like a magic incantation to save us from a fiery fate. Jesus said very little about hell, but he often invited those he taught and healed to live in a distinctive way that trusts and seeks to serve God in every moment. Jesus had very little interest in emotionally charged professions of faith. In fact, he went out of his way to dampen ill-considered enthusiasm

(Luke 9:57-62). Jesus was interested in the slow, tedious work of transforming lives for the long term. Honest evangelism does not misrepresent the call to discipleship. The joy and peace found in trusting a God who loves us beyond all knowing is real, and as an evangelist you need not make any apology in telling how wonderful is such love. Yet with equal honesty, you make clear that God is interested in nothing less than *forming disciples* in the image of Jesus Christ. Just as a potter pushes and prods clay into a shape it would not naturally choose, so God seeks to mold disciples' lives into something new and distinct from the contours of the surrounding culture. Good evangelism makes clear that answering the call to discipleship is the beginning of a long journey of questions, discovery, and growth in the company of Christ and the community of faith.

For Reflection:

1. Think about someone you consider an effective witness of the Christian lifestyle and perspective. What about that person makes his or her witness effective?
2. Good evangelism is grounded in both the gospel and the world in which we live. What are the most difficult issues, which students face on campus? How do the life and teachings of Jesus speak to these issues?
3. The title of this study is drawn from Romans 1:16, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek." How do you experience God's power in your own life? Who is "Jew" or "Greek" today? Insider and outsider?
4. This section offers two definitions of evangelism. How would you alter them to make them more specific to speaking of Jesus on a college campus?

What's So Hard About Evangelism?

By now you may agree that being an evangelist is an important part of being a Christian. But if you are like the majority of Christians you make that admission with a certain reluctance and bad conscience. Like knowing we should eat well and exercise regularly, we know we ought to invite others to share the joy we have found in following Jesus. But most of us find it equally hard to stay on a diet and share our faith. So, why do we resist being evangelists; what makes it so hard?

BAD MODELS

I asked a group of college students, "Which words come to mind when I say 'evangelism'?" The responses were quick and uniformly negative: "legalistic," "self-righteous," "pushy," "naive," "simplistic," "manipulative." It did not take long to figure out that most of the group identified evangelism with

the practices of one or two groups on campus. They told stories of being hounded in their rooms during study time, invited to Bible studies where discussion was not encouraged, and having their religious beliefs dismissed because they did not match those of the group. If this was evangelism, they wanted nothing to do with it, thank you.

One of my colleagues in campus ministry, only half kidding, suggests that the church ought to set up “Jesus Abuse Centers” for people who have had a bad experience with those who claim to represent the only way to be a Christian. You can probably come up with your own examples of coercive evangelism. But it does not follow that because you have a bad experience with what one group calls “evangelism,” you should abandon the effort all together. That would be like forever swearing off apples because you bit into one with a worm in the center.

On the contrary, precisely because poor evangelism presents a distorted picture of God, it is all the more essential that those who have a different, more open attitude become willing to talk about their faith. One of the great gifts Jesus offered those whom he met during his ministry was an invitation to let go of the past and start anew. We, too, can refuse to be bound by old ideas and prejudices. We can be living alternatives to what we find offensive.

IGNORANCE

Nobody likes to look stupid. Maybe you resist talking about your faith with someone because you’re afraid you’ll get a question you can’t answer. That’s natural. We tend to avoid situations where our weaknesses show, whether it’s sports, dancing, or talking about Jesus. But here is a freeing word: You don’t have to have all the answers.

If someone asks you a question you can’t answer, it does not mean you are stupid. It may mean you’re merely ignorant, which is to say you don’t have the information at hand. “Where does Jesus talk about marriage?” “Which gospel has the parable of the Good Samaritan?” You may not have the answer on the tip of your tongue, but you can get it

Salesmen are taught to respond to a question they cannot answer by saying, “I don’t know, but I’ll find out and get back to you.” That is good advice for dealing with questions of fact. There is nothing wrong with doing a little research; in fact, it shows a seriousness and respect for the other person, which gives you credibility. In addition, research enlarges your store of knowledge and you become more confident in dealing with questions the next time.

Still, some questions don’t have neat answers. “Why does God allow so much suffering?” “Why does it seem that evil prospers and the innocent get

played for chumps?” One wit observed, “For every complex problem there is a simple answer—usually wrong.” Religious questions wrestle with the most complex issues of existence; they deal with meaning, purpose, morality, and what it means to be human in a vast universe. In an effort not to appear inadequate, you may be tempted to offer glib answers. In the long run, that is like hiding cracks in a wall with a layer of whitewash; the cracks always come back. You need not be apologetic when you say, “I don’t fully understand God’s ways in the world, but what I have experienced in following Jesus gives me some help in dealing with the parts that do not make sense.” Honesty about what we do not know leads to talk about faith and trust, which is at the heart of evangelism.

IDENTITY

When I watch celebrities pitch soft drinks, cell phones, or shampoo, I always wonder if they actually use the product they seem so eager for me to try. Do they believe in this product or is their enthusiasm simply the result of a hefty fee? Most people have the same attitude when you begin to talk about your faith; they wonder if you really believe what you are saying, or are just mouthing something you’ve been told.

Knowing people are often skeptical about the claims you make for the Christian way of seeing the world, you may be a little self-conscious about the image you convey. You may even decide that their skepticism is justified. It’s not that you do not believe what you are saying; it’s that you sense your devotional practice is not as rich as you would like. You may feel like someone who claims a certain cookbook contains great recipes, but has not gotten into the kitchen to test them out. You can’t say from personal experience whether the recipes really produce good meals. It is hard to speak with conviction unless you have walked the walk. You are more able to talk about your faith if you do so as a “satisfied customer.” Before you share your faith with another person, you want to make sure you are doing the things that allow you to speak with enthusiasm and experience.

If you feel somewhat insecure in your Christian identity, there are certain core practices that the church has historically emphasized in helping the community of believers grow in spiritual maturity. The first practice is corporate worship: we regularly gather with others to sing, pray, learn, and share the sacraments. The second is private devotion: we spend time in prayer and reflection on Scripture, nurturing an intimate relationship with God. Study is a third core practice: we learn all we can about the faith we profess, seeking deeper understanding. Finally, we give ourselves in service to the community of faith and the world: this is the laboratory in which we test our convictions in the crucible of daily life.

As you regularly practice these disciplines, you discover your Christian faith is more than what you profess; it defines who you are. Then you are able to talk about following Jesus with the conviction of a guide who has personally walked the twisted trail.

FEAR OF REJECTION

I hated selling band candy. Every year during high school I had to sell candy to buy new uniforms or take a trip, and every year I dreaded it, because I had a low tolerance for rejection. Inviting someone to embrace our deepest values (which is what evangelism involves) is a lot more important than selling candy, but precisely because that is so, it can be even more intimidating. So much seems to be on the line. When your deepest convictions are being rejected, it is hard for rejection not to feel personal.

Nobody likes to be rejected, but keeping a few key ideas in mind can help you deal with your anxiety. First, it probably won't be as bad you imagine. If you approach persons with courtesy, genuine interest in their needs, and a good sense of the proper time and place to have the conversation, most people will at least give you a hearing.

Second, not everyone is going to respond positively to your invitation. That is no reflection on you; it is more a reflection on the importance of what you are sharing. The invitation to discipleship is daunting. When you ask someone to become a disciple of Jesus, you are asking her to make a life changing decision which will affect every facet of life: use of time and money, sexual behavior, occupational priorities, political choices, and relationships of all types. You cannot expect everyone to respond positively. Many turned away from following Jesus when they realized what might be expected, and he warned the apostles that some resistance is inevitable (Matthew 10:24-25).

Third, there are some things for which it is worth risking rejection. You are not trying to pawn off shoddy goods when you invite others to follow Jesus, not hawking snake oil for the pain of the world. When you tell others about Jesus, you offer a healing, life-giving relationship to God. Everyone will not respond positively; that's okay, your responsibility is to tell what you have experienced as a disciple, and allow the Holy Spirit to work in another's life.

Fourth, it's not all or nothing. On rare occasions someone makes a radical, 180-degree turn to discipleship after a single encounter with the message of Jesus. More often the process of conversion is like water slowly drip, drip, dripping on a rock until it finally has an effect. When you share your faith with a friend, it may look like nothing has happened, but like leaven in a lump of flour or seed sending out tiny roots under the soil, God is working to make a change in that person's life (Luke 13:18-21). What feels like rejection may be your planting of a seed.

LACK OF PRACTICE

“Well okay, I can see that evangelism is important,” you might say, “but I feel I just don’t do it very well.” In response, let me ask you a question, “Do you play tennis well?” If you answered “yes,” I suspect that you have spent a lot of time out on the courts, practicing groundstrokes, volleys, and serves. If you said, “no,” I am equally sure you have not invested a lot of time in honing your skills. The point is not a subtle one: We seldom do things well until we have practiced, and with practice we become both more confident and proficient.

The first time we decide to initiate a conversation about our religious convictions, we will feel as clumsy and self-conscious as we did the first time we tried to hit a backhand. Some people have natural gifts, whether for tennis or conversation, and most of us feel awkward the first few times we try something new. However, with repetition, we do get better! The key is to start. You never get better at tennis until you step on the court, and you never become better at sharing your faith until you do it the first time. Don’t expect perfection from yourself; just be yourself with the other person. Be honest, open, and willing to share what about following Jesus excites you. The next time it will be easier.

For Reflection:

1. If you were painting a picture entitled, “Evangelism”, what would it look like?
2. After the first section you thought about someone who is an effective witness to Jesus. Now think about a negative experience you have had with someone attempting to be an evangelist. Why did you react negatively? What could that person have done more effectively to communicate with you?
3. This section offers several possible reasons we resist being evangelists. Which one was most true for you? Are there other reasons you would add to the list?
4. Do you consider yourself a “satisfied customer” of the gospel? What might you do to strengthen your own Christian identity?

Becoming an Evangelist

“But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give a reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.” (1 Peter 3:15)

There you have it, a one-sentence summary of what it takes to be a good evangelist. Good evangelists know what they believe and are willing and able to share their convictions. But their attitude, as much as their words, communicates the welcome

of God. So how do you become an evangelist who is both confident and compassionate?

BE TRANSFORMED

Before you can persuade someone else to consider following Jesus, you have to have a strong sense of what you believe and why you believe it. Not long ago I went out to buy some computer software. Trying to determine if a product I was considering would meet my needs, I asked the salesman some questions. It quickly became obvious that he had no idea how the software worked. I walked away because I did not feel I could trust his judgment; he was only a seller, not a user, of his product. If others are to trust you, they have to believe you are a user, and not just seller, of the gospel.

Paul tells the Romans “offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind.” Before you can communicate your faith, it has to permeate every facet of your life and change the way you see the world, make decisions, and set priorities. Until the gospel has transformed you in some important way, you are not ready to recommend it to others. Transformation takes place when the Holy Spirit touches you, as you become regular in worship, diligent in prayer, eager in learning, and willing in service.

Does that mean you have to be an exemplary model of Christian discipleship before you can open your mouth in witness to another? Certainly not! It does mean, however, that you are seriously committed to the journey of discipleship on which you are inviting others to embark.

BE ATTENTIVE

Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote, “Earth’s crammed with heaven and every common bush afire with God, but only those who see take off their shoes. The rest sit round and pluck blackberries.” Browning’s allusion to the call of Moses reminds us that, while God is present in every situation, we may not be attentive to the possibilities we are given.

Sometimes you get an opportunity to talk about your faith, but it comes in very subtle ways: a sad look, a deep sigh, a question about why you roll out of bed early every Sunday when the rest of the dorm is still passed out. You can let the moment pass or take a moment to explore whether someone is reaching out to God, even if they don’t know it. Good evangelists assume that in every time and place God is eager to heal the hurting and guide the confused. As an evangelist, your task is not to push God into every conversation; it is gently to notice when the desire for God is being expressed, and then give voice to God’s care and challenge.

BE CONCERNED

Attention is of little value if you do not communicate concern. A student on the campus I serve told me about being invited to join a dormitory Bible study group. The leader approached her by saying, "Please join us; we need to have five in the study." I am sure the invitation was sincere, but the way it was delivered was a turn-off. The invitee did not feel valued, nor did she see why this particular study might be of benefit to her. She was just a potential body.

If you want others to respond to your invitation to consider discipleship, you have to first communicate willingness to take the time to know them. There are no shortcuts; good evangelists spend a lot of time listening to others. Most evangelism takes place between people who have a previously established relationship, and relationships are like fine art, created patiently and reflectively. When you know something about a friend's home life, interests, struggles, fears, and hopes, you can sound that note of the Christian song that will find resonance in her heart. Such concern is not the false interest of an unscrupulous huckster, intent on selling a product that is neither needed nor wanted. Rather, this is the insightful concern of a doctor who wants to know a person's body and spirit well, in order to prescribe the best treatment from many possibilities.

BE INTENTIONAL AND ENGAGED

I have a friend who runs marathons. He did not get to be a long distance runner by lacing up his running shoes whenever he had a few spare moments. He decided that he wanted to run in a particular race and then set about creating the time to train. Each day he arranged meetings, car pools, and the rest of his schedule to make time for running.

Good evangelists are as intentional about sharing their faith as my friend is about his running. Good evangelists plan to talk about their faith; they are open to spontaneous opportunities to share their faith, but are not limited by them. When you are intentional about evangelism, you pray for an opportunity to share your faith with those in your circle who seem particularly open to hearing your witness. You make talking about faith matters a priority as you establish new relationships.

Despite the fact that there are more people on the average campus who do not consider themselves to be active Christians than do, you may feel you have few opportunities to share your faith. It is easy for communities of faith to become so inwardly focused that their members spend most of their free time with other Christians. That makes for great mutual support, but few opportunities for outreach and evangelism. Intentional evangelists look for relationships beyond a tight circle of like-minded friends. Joining the biking club, taking part in student government, or participating in any number of other

campus activities keeps you engaged with the world outside the church, the world for which Jesus Christ died.

Do you still think that being an evangelist is just too awkward for you? Let me ask you to keep Mitch in mind. Mitch showed up in my office one afternoon, when I had way more projects than time to do them. As I heard the outer door slam, I thought to myself, “Man, I do not need another interruption right now!” But everything changed when he stepped to the threshold of my office and announced without prelude, “I’ve tried everything else, and I figure there must be more to life than this. Can you tell me about God?” So began our relationship, which resulted in his baptism at the Easter vigil service.

I am thankful that God led Mitch to my office door, but I am haunted by the thought that there are a lot more people like Mitch out there, young men and women who are pretty sure there must be more to life than parties, grades, and the quest for a high paying job. I am sure you know someone like Mitch. Perhaps he or she will not give you as explicit an opportunity to talk about Jesus as Mitch gave me, but you can be sure that someone you know is searching for the hope and joy found in following the path of discipleship. Just tell them what you have experienced, and let God do the rest.

For Reflection:

1. Browning says that “earth’s crammed with heaven.” What are some seemingly ordinary events in a typical day on campus, which present opportunities for inviting others to consider the way of Jesus?
2. Write a one-paragraph statement on “Why I choose to follow Jesus.”
3. How can you tell someone is genuinely concerned about you? How might your answer affect the way you approach sharing your faith?
4. Many religions are practiced on the average college campus. What do you think the Christian’s attitude should be toward those who devoutly practice another faith?
5. With a partner, role play one or more of the following situations:
 - A friend comes into your room, fresh from reading his philosophy assignment, and says, “ I can’t imagine that you still believe in God.”
 - Returning from Sunday morning worship services, you bump into someone on your hall who has obviously had a rough morning after a long night. She sounds a little defensive when she says, “Well I guess you are feeling pretty smug looking at me.”

- You notice a guy in one of your classes who always seems alone and sad. He asks if he can borrow some notes and you start talking.
- You tell the captain of your intramural softball team that you will be late to practice because you are going to a Bible study. He observes, "It's hard for me to see how a bunch of old stories have anything to do with my life."
- Your roommate gets word that his father has died suddenly. He snarls at you, "So where is your God now"?