

Introduction

Confessions of an evangelist

FOR THE FIRST COUPLE of years of my faith I was a passionate promoter of the Christian message. I was 15 years old and spoke about Christ to everyone who would listen. Without any background in Christianity I just assumed everyone would want to hear what I had heard. I shared my new beliefs with my mother, my friends, my football team, strangers on the street and even the crowds of other teenagers I met on the holiday camps my mum used to send me on (regularly, for some reason!).

In those early years as a believer I had absolutely no idea Christians could be coy about their faith. No one had told me I was meant to feel awkward about spreading the good news. That was something I learnt only after mixing with Christians for a while. But I learnt it soon enough.

Because of my obvious enthusiasm for sharing the Faith with others, my church decided I should be trained in 'evangelism'. I had never heard of 'evangelism'; I just wanted others to discover what I had discovered. I did not know there was a word for it.

So, off I went to special classes once a week for several months where I was trained in one of the popular evangelism training tools. There I learnt a carefully prepared gospel outline, a set of illustrations to explain the message, and a list of Bible verses to back it all up.

At the end of the course I was turned loose on the public of Sydney. I took part in pre-arranged home visits, systematic

door knocking, and even ‘cold turkey’ walk-ups at the local shopping centre.

Suddenly, my joy and ability at passing on the Faith evaporated. I had previously delighted in sharing Christ with others, but now it seemed a burden: a burden on my emotions, on my memory and, perhaps most of all, on my poor unsuspecting evangelistic ‘targets’. This enthusiastic, natural promoter of Christ had been transformed into a nervous and unnerving ‘Bible-basher’.

I do not blame the course itself. Many Christians around the world have been helped by this and other programs. But I suspect the way the course was run in my church, combined with my overeager personality, left me with several unhealthy perspectives on what it means to promote Christ to others. I have since discovered just how common these perspectives are in modern church circles.

The curse of self-consciousness

Firstly, I had become self-conscious about reaching out to others with the news of Christ. When I first became a Christian, promoting Christ was a perfectly natural orientation of my whole faith. It was similar to the way I felt about football (or what Australians used to call ‘soccer’). I loved football. I played it almost every day. I watched every televised Premier League match. I talked about it and asked friends to come up to the local oval for a kick-around. I never dreamt that football-lovers might be self-conscious about mentioning it or coy about inviting others to play it.

But after attending this evangelism course, that is exactly how I felt about my faith. Suddenly, mentioning God and inviting people to church had become a specialised compartment of the

Faith. It had its own name—evangelism—its own propositions and jargon, and even its own multi-week courses. Whereas I once talked of God as freely as I talked about my favourite TV show, now I found myself switching into ‘evangelism mode’—where the heart beats faster, the palms get sweaty and you feel the pressure to steer the conversation in a most un-conversational manner. What was once a natural outflow of faith, something requiring very little concentration, now felt like a cross between a theological exam, an acting class and a knife-edge rescue operation. Like David Beckham’s string of missed penalty shots a couple of years ago, the pressure to perform something that used to come naturally forced my evangelistic opportunities right over the crossbar and into the stadium.

Let me reiterate: evangelism courses *per se* are not the problem. Many Christians undergo such training without ever feeling self-conscious; others feel self-conscious without ever being trained. Nevertheless, I suspect many would agree that this evangelistic self-consciousness is very common amongst modern believers (with or without the help of evangelism training courses).

Thankfully my own evangelistic self-consciousness soon passed. After months of trying to ‘perform’ as I had been taught, I decided to relax. I forgot about getting it ‘right’, getting it ‘in order’ and getting my conversation partner ‘over the line’. Instead, I decided to approach my gospel opportunities as if they were friendly conversations about my favourite topic. It was not long before I realised again that this is exactly what sharing the faith is.

Part of my hope in writing this book is that a fresh, biblical look at the topic of evangelistic mission will go some way toward dispelling Christian self-consciousness.

The gospel 'download'

The second outlook I inherited from my days as a budding evangelist was equally unhelpful. I began to think that if I had an opportunity to say something about Christianity I ought to say everything about it. I had spent months learning a gospel outline, complete with analogies and Bible verses. I somehow got it into my head that it was my duty to download the whole thing no matter how passing the conversation about Christianity might have been. I don't know how many poor souls had to endure my sermonettes before I realised the glazed look in their eyes was not the look of spiritual wonder!

In reality, most of our opportunities to speak about Christianity will occur in passing, in the to-and-fro of daily conversation. It should not surprise us then that the two clearest passages in the Bible calling on all believers to speak up for the Lord urge them simply to 'answer' for the Faith—to respond to people's comments, questions or criticisms with a gentle and gracious reply (Colossians 4:5-6 and 1 Peter 3:15).

Most Christians are not 'evangelists' (in the technical sense of the word, anyway) and should not be made to feel the pressure to be something they are not. The Scriptures certainly urge us all to be open about our faith whenever opportunity allows, but doing 'the work of an evangelist' (2 Timothy 4:5) is something God's Word asks of only some of us.¹

Of course, if you have a chance to explain the whole message of Christ, go for it! Evangelists don't have a monopoly here. My point is simply this: far more frequent than the full gospel opportunity will be the passing opportunities to offer brief nuggets about the Faith to those around us—a relative at the Christmas lunch, a friend at the pub, a parent on the sideline and

so on. On occasions like these a gospel ‘bite’ will usually prove more useful to your hearer than a gospel download.

Reducing the gospel

The third unhelpful perspective I picked up in my early evangelism training concerns the gospel message itself. The particular course I studied summarized the gospel in the theological concepts of sin and grace. The goal of the presentation I had to memorise was to convince my hearers (a) that they were unworthy of God’s acceptance because of their rebellion and (b) that God’s acceptance was offered on the basis of faith alone, not good works. The gospel, in other words, was condensed to two doctrines with little attempt to connect these ideas to the flesh-and-blood story of Jesus’ birth, teaching, miracles, death, resurrection, appearances and return for judgement.

Some gospel preaching today—including some gospel conversations we have with friends—forgets that, at its heart, the gospel is the news about Jesus as narrated in the Gospels. This is why the four Gospels are called ‘Gospels’—because more than any other part of Scripture they tell the gospel. This is why the apostolic preaching in the book of Acts generally narrates the entire story of Jesus, including his birth to King David’s line, baptism by John, miracles, arrest and so on (Acts 2:22-39; 4:8-12; 10:34-43; 13:16-41). This is why when Paul explicitly summarizes the content of the gospel in his letters he does so by outlining the key events of Jesus’ life from birth to exaltation, including of course his death, burial and appearances (Romans 1:2-4; 2 Timothy 2:8; 1 Corinthians 15:1-8).

Of course, sin and grace are central to any true gospel presentation (as they are in the four Gospels themselves) but the

gospel cannot be reduced to these themes any more than it can be reduced to a simple retelling of Jesus' 'biography'.

I will say much more about this in the ridiculously long Appendix 1, 'What is the gospel?'. For now, let me just say that the gospel is not a theological idea or two. It is theology grounded in the actual events of Jesus' life. The gospel and the Gospels are one. Let me offer a concise summary of what I mean by the 'gospel' throughout this book:

The gospel is the announcement that God has revealed and opened up his kingdom to sinners through the birth, teaching, miracles, death and resurrection of the Messiah Jesus who will one day return to overthrow evil and consummate the kingdom for eternity.

Underestimating the mission

There is a fourth unhelpful perspective I developed in those early days. This one was probably the result of my personality as much as any training I received. Somehow I came to assume that the only important means of promoting Christ was talking about him. Reaching out to others became for me an entirely verbal activity.

But perhaps the best-kept secret of Christian mission is that the Bible lists a whole range of activities that promote Christ to the world and draw others toward him. These include prayer, godly behaviour, financial assistance, the public praise of God (in church) and, as already mentioned, answering people's questions. All of these are explicitly connected in the Bible with advancing the gospel and winning people to Christ. They are all 'mission' activities and only a couple of them involve the lips at all.

I do not want to diminish the role of speaking. As I have said already, the New Testament urges us to be open about Christ in

our regular conversations. To push our faith below the level of daily speech is unnatural and a sure sign of Christian ill health. At the same time, downplaying the range of mission activities listed in the Bible creates its own set of problems. It can make those who do not have a flair for speaking feel inadequate in their contribution to God's work in the world. Perhaps more worryingly—and this was certainly so in my case—it can make those who do have the 'gift of the gab' feel they are fulfilling God's plans just by talking. The Lord wants more than our lips in the grand task of taking his mercy to our friends and neighbours. To think otherwise, as I did for years, is to greatly underestimate what God's mission involves.

In light of this, I want to make a distinction throughout this book between the specific activity of *proclaiming the gospel*, or what is properly called 'evangelism', and the broader category of *promoting the gospel* which includes any and every activity which draws others to Christ.² This broader category is sometimes called 'mission' or 'outreach' or 'witness' but the expression 'promoting the gospel' reminds us that at the heart of our mission to the world is the news of Christ, the gospel.

The concept of promoting the gospel obviously includes evangelism but it also tries to give a proper place to things like prayer, godly behaviour, and answering for the Faith, all of which are explicitly connected in the New Testament with God's plan to save his people. Such activities are not separate from the work of the gospel; they are supportive of it and vital to it. Praying that your friends and neighbours would come to know Christ is no less a promotion of the gospel than speaking to them about Christ. Both activities are evangelistic, even if only one of them is evangelism in the strict sense. This does not mean that those who pray for their

friends need not worry about speaking to them, any more than it means that those who speak to their friends need not worry about praying for them. My point is that both activities are full contributions to the promotion of Christ in the world.

For years, both as a public evangelist and as a personal encourager, I urged other Christians to evangelise (announce the gospel) as if this were the only significant thing they could do to promote Christ. In a sense, I was projecting my own ministry and personality onto believers in general. I was an evangelist; everyone else should be as well. That was the logic.

The problem is: God's Word does not quite put it that way, and attempts to argue otherwise usually involve stretching biblical passages beyond their plain meaning. I used to do it myself both in sermons and (I am embarrassed to say) in my first book.³ The motivation was honourable—I wanted more Christians to be more involved in the work of the gospel—but, as with so many other issues, a worthy goal does not give me permission to handle the Scriptures poorly. We are involved in God's mission, and so we must allow his Word to shape our part in it. The slogan 'every-Christian-an-evangelist' has a noble purpose but it is an unbiblical way of speaking.

For Christians in general—as opposed to evangelists in particular—telling the gospel to others (evangelism) could be described as the icing on the cake of mission. It is certainly the most conspicuous part and, once tasted, it will often be the sweetest part too, but for the typical Christian it is not the bulk of the task. It is not where most of our opportunities to promote Christ to others will be found.

A central aim of this book, then, is to show just how all-encompassing is the Bible's call to be involved in God's mission.

I hope and pray that what follows will inspire you to see everything you do in life as a tool in God's hands for the benefit of those who don't yet know Christ.

Before we explore the Bible's multifaceted approach to the promotion of the gospel, we should stop to ask the most obvious question: why get involved in God's mission?