

Things That (Surprisingly) Can Get in the Way of Evangelism

Sadly, it's taken me years to figure out that there are a number of things that we use to evangelize that, if we are not careful, become a distraction to real evangelism.

Church

Have you ever invited someone to church with a pitch that sounded something like this?: “Hey, you should really come to church with us! We have great classes that I bet your two children will really love! We have a very friendly congregation that will make you feel right at home! And we hang out with each other at least once a month!”

Now, I love to brag about our excellent classes, our comfortable building, our friendly members, and our exciting activities. I will continue to point them out. However, I must also be more careful. It is very easy to sell a person on a congregation, astutely making connections to his circumstances and interests, while completely avoiding the real issue, which is—in case we forgot—salvation.

Paul said, “I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes” (Romans 1:16). The gospel is the message of truth, the startling realization that a person has sinned and fallen short of the glory of God and is trapped in a lost condition, followed quickly by the amazingly good news that Jesus shed His blood to provide redemption from sin and eternal fellowship with God. It is tempting to be “ashamed” of this message and bury it under layers of activities and small talk, only allowing it to be discovered slowly and softly and unthreateningly sometime down the line, almost by accident.

In contrast, the discussions that Peter, John, and Paul had with various people feature an immediate and unswerving emphasis on the gospel of Jesus. The men of Jerusalem were not charmed by a nice church; they were “pierced to the heart” (Acts 2:37) by the discovery of Jesus’ identity as the Son of God. They were driven to repentance. The people of Antioch did not come to hang out with the brethren at dinner; rather, “the whole city assembled to hear the word of the Lord” (Acts 13:44). Many strongly rejected it, but some began to glorify Jesus. The eunuch didn’t thank Philip for inviting him to come to a marriage seminar next time he was in town; he heard Philip “preach Jesus to him” (Acts 8:35). He was baptized into Christ right there on the side of the road!

A friendly, active church is a wonderful blessing to the membership. A friendly, active church will impress a prospect (John 13:35); or, at least not drive him away before he can learn. A friendly, active church is worth creating and maintaining (Rom. 12:10). But a sinner must be

converted to Jesus. If he is not—if he just attends worship for months without being asked to sit down across the table with an open Bible, or if he is baptized in a mistaken belief that it's the step he must take to be allowed to become fully involved in the church's programs, then He has never understood what it means to make the good confession. He has joined himself to a church, but he has not joined himself to Christ.

Often, as soon as someone upsets him at a church gathering, as soon as he becomes disenchanted with the preacher, as soon as he sits through a less-than-spectacular class, he will seek greener pastures.

Worship

This overlaps the previous point. "Come to church at 10:00am to hear a clever talk" is not a substitute for face-to-face study (1 Cor. 2:1-2). Christians worship; non-Christians observe.

Still, a Biblical, heart-felt worship service can be a great start if it is followed up with an invitation to study the gospel. A worship service that eagerly anticipates visitors and addresses their spiritual needs is an excellent tool for evangelism (1 Cor. 14:24-25, Jam. 2:1-4).

Friendship

Please, please don't misunderstand what I'm about to say. I have many friends in the world whose company I greatly enjoy. Christians should have many acquaintances (Matt. 5:13-15, 1 Cor. 5:10). Friends and relatives are often a promising mission field. Familiarity and trust helps, because modern Americans will rarely buy a vacuum cleaner from someone they aren't comfortable with, much less talk religion.

But friendship can become an obstacle to evangelism. I don't know about you, but the closer I get to someone, the more and more worried I become about ruining our relationship by proclaiming the always-challenging, potentially-infuriating gospel.

Perhaps there have been many friends through the years who have come and gone without knowing what I truly believe (to put it more accurately, what the gospel demands). They knew I was a preacher; but did they know what I preached? They knew what I did from 9-to-5, but did they know whom I served?

Paul managed to conduct himself in such a way that he could depart the company of the Ephesians, declaring, I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you publicly and from house to house, solemnly testifying to both Jews and Greeks of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ ... I testify to you this day that I am

innocent of the blood of all men. For I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God (Acts 20:20-27). What innocence was Paul declaring? Not his lack of criminal behavior (this we can safely assume). Rather, his determination to discharge his watchman's duty (Ezek. 3:17-21) to speak of Jesus to each and every one of his acquaintances.

On the Day of Judgment, will I be able to declare the same thing? To face the condemned and say, "I am innocent of your doom, for I tried to convince you; I told you plainly!" Or, will I say, "I'm sorry it never came up in conversation, for we were having such a good time..."

I am in favor of evangelizing one's friends, but I am not in favor of "friendship evangelism," which is the doctrine of becoming buddies with people for the purpose of getting close enough to get around to speaking of one's faith. When I start trying to win people to the Lord by the force of my personality, rather than by His divine authority, then I have lost the plot.

Besides this, there are practical considerations to fulfilling the great commission as quickly and thoroughly as possible. Paul didn't have time to play three rounds of golf with every person he preached to! Paul accomplished more in three weeks in Thessalonica (Acts 17:1-4) than most preachers accomplish in thirty years.

Charity

This is another one where I run the risk of being misunderstood. Alleviating suffering is our responsibility when we have the opportunity (Matt. 25:34-40, Luke 10:29-37, Gal. 6:9-10, James 1:27).

But we have to be so careful not to "butter up" prospects with gifts so that we can bait-and-switch the gospel. "Our exhortation does not come ... by way of deceit" (1 Thess. 2:3). I'm afraid I've ruined my chances to get serious about the gospel with some who got hooked on handouts first. Perhaps Acts 3:6 serves as a cautionary tale. —John Guzzetta