

# Evangelism Reimagined

*Seeking the thriving and wholeness of others*

By

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For Christians, sharing our faith is supposed to be something that happens naturally and with enthusiasm. After all, it is the good news. For some believers, evangelism is what wakes us up in the morning. For others, it can sometimes feel inauthentic or unnatural.

I've been actively sharing my faith for about 20 years. For the first 10 years, my motivation was simple: I was concerned with what happened to people after they die. For the last 10 years, though, my motivation shifted to being concerned about how people live. Both are legitimate motivations, but what matters most is what the person I am sharing with cares about.

Cru recently reported that, using a mixed-method study, 84% of the U.S. population is ready and willing to have conversations about Jesus—as long as these five postures exist in the conversation:

1. Be present and listen. Follow the conversation and not your agenda.
2. Find common ground. Build a relational bridge.
3. Walk in their shoes. Understand their story.
4. Talk like a real person. Use words meant for real people and not the pews.
5. Create a better story than the one they've heard.

Let that sink in for a moment. Four out of five people are ready and willing to talk about Jesus. We just need to change how we talk about faith. So let's reimagine what evangelism could look like.

## ***Meet People's Unique Needs***

One of the things Jesus does so well when he talks to people is to identify what they're longing for and meet that longing. Whether it is the woman at the well (John 4) who longed for intimacy and belonging, the rich young ruler (Matt. 19:16–22) who wanted to know if he was good enough or the paralytic being dropped through a roof who just

wanted to walk (Mark 2), Jesus met every person in their unique needs. In the same way, we must listen to people, ask good questions and invite the Holy Spirit to help us discern what their core longings are. Similar to people in the Bible who met Jesus, many people will have smokescreens in place to hide what they truly long for, so we have to look beyond the superficial and into the longings of their hearts.

Longings exist because we were created for something different. We were created for the Garden of Eden in the beginning when God created everything and we were created for what life will be like when God brings the new creation. The gap between our present reality and our future hope in heaven creates a longing (Romans 8:18-23). The greater the gap, the greater the longing.

Everything Jesus does, from his teachings to miracles to interactions with people, shows us something of the kingdom of God. Jesus teaches his disciples to see the world through the lens of the kingdom, and by doing so, they become kingdom citizens. As they become kingdom citizens and teach others to follow Jesus, the kingdom of God breaks through into this world just like Jesus' prayer: "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt. 6:10).

The more we can see ourselves, other people, this world and God through this kingdom lens, the more we are transformed into who we were created to be and who we will one day be.

So what does all this have to do with evangelism? Evangelism is all about sharing the gospel, the good news. But good news about what? There is some debate about this, but in my opinion, it is the good news of the kingdom of God. Jesus' life, death and resurrection inaugurate the breaking through of the kingdom into this world, and we get to participate in that. The kingdom and the king are all that we long for, so it really is good news for every person who believes, because not only do we get to experience eternity in the kingdom, but the kingdom can meet us in our longings here on earth in significant ways.

Think of evangelism as someone's entry point into the kingdom, the conversation that piques their curiosity and makes them want to know more. Different people have different longings, so I want to listen for what they are longing for and communicate how the kingdom meets them there. Missiologists call this contextualizing the gospel. This

doesn't change the message of the gospel; it simply meets people where they are.

### ***Address the Lies***

Humanity's downfall started with believing a lie, or more accurately, a perversion of the truth. This lie created an unholy longing in our hearts. For Adam and Eve, they wanted to be like God, not realizing that they were already made in God's image. Cain believed in a lie that produced a jealousy ending in murder. This pattern of people believing in lies continues to this day in each of our hearts. The lies lead to longings which lead to us seeking life where there is no life.

Think of sin like a tree. The fruit is sinful behavior, the branches are our longings or where we seek life where there is no life, the trunk is the lies we believe and the roots are what we worship. What we worship determines how we understand reality. Worshiping the wrong thing produces longings that lead to unhealthy behavior. For example, if we worship money, we will see other people as ways to get more money (objectification), we will see our own value based on how much money we have or our earning potential and we will see God as a way to get more money. But if we worship God, we see other people as inherently valuable, we see our own value as inherent and we see God as good because while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

This tree concept is really important as we think about evangelism because we need to know what to listen for and what questions to ask. Often conversations will be around the fruit, or sin behavior, and end there. We tell people to stop the behavior, or that we will pray for them, or (if we're bold) that they need Jesus. But they don't see the connection between Jesus and their behavior because no one is connecting the dots and telling them a better story. What we need to do is journey and discover with them. As we journey with them by asking questions, we may discover what they are really longing for, what lie they believe and ultimately what they are worshiping.

In high school, I used to cheat all the time. The reason I did this was because I had ADHD and struggled to focus on my schoolwork. What I was longing for was to be viewed as smart. That's because I believed to be valuable, I had to be smart. But because I wasn't smart, I thought I was worthless. Ultimately, it was because I worshiped other people and

what they thought of me. It wasn't until someone said, "It doesn't matter how smart you are or how good at sports you are or how popular you are, God loves and values you regardless of all that because you are made in his image" that the gospel resonated with me for the first time. What I was longing for was value, and in that moment the kingdom met me in my longing. This was my entry point to seeking the King and the kingdom.

I still have to do the hard work to address the lies I believe and dig down deep to discover and tackle the false things I'm worshipping. The process of addressing the lies and replacing them with kingdom truth is repentance. Alan Hirsch talks about how the word for repentance in the Greek is *metanoia*, which he defines as paradigm shift. Those experiences in which we have a paradigm shift in how we understand reality are when we experience true transformation rather than simply trying harder to stop sinning. This is where evangelism, discipleship and repentance converge.

### ***Shift Paradigms***

The day I discovered something true about God's love and something about my own inherent value, my paradigm shifted. As I walk with Jesus, I find that every once in a while God changes my paradigm as I better understand something that is true about his kingdom, and I choose to trust that truth above my own perception of truth. Through the years, God has addressed my longing for significance, for security, for power and a whole host of other things and the lies that correspond with those longings. The more I am aware of those longings in my heart and how God has helped me work through them, the more I am able to see similar longings in other people and walk with them through those longings.

A while back, a woman shared with me that she was stressed out at work, to which I responded, "Six months ago I had a ton of anxiety at work." She asked, "Did your job get easier?" I said, "No, a Bible verse popped into my head, and as I thought of the implications of the verse, it completely changed my perception of my situation." She paused for a few moments and said, "What was the verse?"

"But God demonstrates his own love for us in this, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us," I replied. "As I thought about that passage, I extrapolated this idea that I am inherently valuable. As I

thought of the implications of that, it crossed my mind that my anxiety came from what other people thought of me. If I'm inherently valuable, why do I allow other people to assign value to me? The more that truth sank in, the more my anxiety melted away."

This is what happens when we experience the kingdom of God—it makes such a difference in our lives that we share with others because we want them to experience the same thing. One way we can do this is by sharing micro-testimonies, stories about how the kingdom of God has met you in your longing and the difference it has made for you. They include, but are not limited to, your conversion testimony.

Here are some prompts to help you process your story and how you might share it with someone else.

1. Spend a few minutes in prayer and ask God to help you identify a significant moment that he met you in a time of pain, fear or longing. Describe what you experienced.

2. What lies about God, yourself and/or the situation influenced your thinking? Try to think of the lie behind the lie.

3. Describe the ways you tried to cope with your pain, fear or longings.

4. How did God address those lies to bring about a change in your perspective? What is the truth about God and/or yourself that he showed you?

5. How does believing that truth affect how you walk through fear, pain or longing today?

What is important when we share our micro-testimonies is that we listen to what the person we are talking to is longing for. Don't use a lot of Christian lingo; just talk normally. Lastly, give priority to saying what would be good news to them.

These conversations can happen whether a person is Christian or not. We all have longings and believe in lies, so there is no need to approach a Christian with a discipleship strategy and a non-Christian with an evangelism strategy; you can disciple a non-Christian toward following Jesus.

It is helpful to note that the Bible never differentiates evangelism and discipleship. The Great Commission simply calls us to make disciples of all nations. Therefore, it can sometimes be unhelpful to

speaking differently to Christians than to people who don't profess to follow Jesus.

Typically, if we are ministering to a person we think of as a Christian, we apply a discipleship strategy whereas if we are talking to someone we think of as a non-Christian, we apply an evangelism strategy. Here's the problem: Jesus says in Matthew 7:21–23:

“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?’ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’”

We don't actually know who a true follower is and who is not, so rather than applying one strategy or another, we use a singular approach regardless of whom we are talking to. This singular approach is an invitation to repentance—a kingdom paradigm shift.

One way to think about evangelism/discipleship is as a “centered set” versus a “bounded set” as proposed by missiologist Paul Hiebert. A bounded set is like a square with a line down the middle and the goal is to move someone from one side to the other, from unsaved to saved, from lost to found. A centered set is like a dot with a circle around it, except we don't know where the circle actually is, and the goal is to move people toward that dot, which represents Jesus and his kingdom. With a centered-set view, we can have conversations with anyone without trying to discern whether the person is a Christian.

### ***Refresh Definitions***

When I began approaching evangelism and discipleship from this framework, I realized I had to learn how to talk like a real person again. In 2012, I conducted research on how to have gospel conversations with young people. My hypothesis was that Christianity (at least how we were communicating it) was trying to answer questions that young people were no longer asking. So I set out to discover what questions older generations were asking and the questions younger generations were asking when it came to faith. It appeared young people didn't even seem to care about what happens after they die. So I dug a little into why that is, and what I found was fascinating.

Elizabeth Nesbit Wagner did some research on anxiety among millennials and Gen Z. In her book, *Effective Generational Ministry* (Baker Academic), she found that they have a higher average level of anxiety than older generations. These high and consistent levels of anxiety put people into a constant state of fight or flight. She shares the example of standing in front of a bear: your mind focuses on surviving the moment. The project you have due next week is totally forgotten about. This is why younger generations don't seem to care about heaven or hell. They aren't thinking about the future.

So, what questions *are* they asking? They appear to be asking questions like, "What does it mean for me to thrive as a human being and for the world to flourish?" I realized that I wasn't prepared to share the gospel in a way that answered that question, at least not in a satisfying way. I spent the next two years studying the book of Matthew to see what Jesus said about thriving.

An example of this is how we understand the word "saved." I grew up believing that to be saved was basically entry into heaven. The Greek word for saved is *sozo*, which does mean to save, but it also means to be made whole. Jesus uses the word *sozo* when he says, "Your faith has saved you" and when he says, "Your faith has made you well." It makes sense when you realize that *sozo* is about becoming more like who we were created to be (in the garden of Eden) and who we will one day be in the new heavens and the new earth. This blew my mind the first time I discovered this, because my faith had always been so focused on the afterlife, but God is in fact in the business of making people whole again, not just spiritually, but mentally, emotionally and physically too.

I started understanding that each Christianese word was so much more nuanced than how I originally understood it. Sin went from a behavior I felt guilty for to seeking life where there is not life. Repentance went from feeling horrible about myself and begging God for forgiveness to acknowledging lies I believe in my heart and trusting what God says is true instead. The good news was becoming even better news that I was excited to share because it was resonating within my heart in a fresh way.

With all these new definitions, I went out and tested some ideas I had around language. I used words

like *sin, faith, repentance* and *salvation*—not to see if people received them positively or negatively, but to determine if they understood the words in the way I intended to convey them. You could probably guess that they did not.

I then stripped my vocab of Christian lingo and shared how after a hard day, I would self-medicate by bingeing Netflix, and in doing so I realized that I was seeking life where there was no life. People would often share how they did the same thing, except by drinking or by some other means, and that they realized there was no life in it. We were finally having conversations that weren't us versus them, but us journeying together, learning what it meant to have the fullness of life. I also changed the way I talked about my job. For example, in the past if I were asked what I did for a living, I would say college ministry or something along those lines. Now I say, "My job is to walk alongside people and help them figure out what it means to thrive." Usually this response interests the person who asked and leads to a conversation.

This new approach gave me permission to redefine evangelism for myself as seeking the thriving or wholeness of others. The conversation moved from wondering whether the person was going to heaven or not to what the person needed in order to be more whole.

I believe that the more we surrender our lives to Jesus and his kingdom, the more whole we become. In the Bible, when Jesus interacts with someone, he creates a space of belonging. He restores their dignity and humanity in the way that he treats them.

For me this is what evangelism is—drawing out the image of God within a person and restoring them to what he created them for.

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