Faith Shaping and Sharing

Evangelism in Everyday Life

Where is God in the Work of Evangelism?

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A member of Jake's family had attended church the previous Sunday. I returned the visit one afternoon about supper time. Jake answered the door and invited me in. Conversation came easy. He told me of his family origin, how they had moved to the city four years earlier, about their church background. He explained about their present church involvement—how they were sporadic in their worship attendance and hesitant to make the commitment to any particular church. He talked about how there are many ways to God and that no one single church had a corner on truth.

I asked Jake about his own spiritual life. He noted that he was usually trying to do his best, although he knew he fell far short of what God expected. He wanted to be a better person and a better Christian.

Our conversation flowed back and forth and he expressed a longing to be nearer to God.

My experience with Jake contrasted with my meeting with Ann. Ann had attended church when the choir presented a musical. She'd come at the invitation of one of the altos in our choir. Ann said that she had enjoyed the service. She complimented the choir and the music director for the fine production. She mentioned she usually attended church on special occasions such as the one at our church. Upon questioning her about her church background, she became tense. Her comments were short and guarded. I inquired as to her feelings about her days growing up in church. She changed the subject. Later on I said, "When I was a boy, I went to Vacation Bible School and summer camps. Did you also have those childhood experiences?"

"Yes," she responded. "But I don't feel good about what happened in our church when I was a teenager."

"Are you comfortable talking about what took place?" I asked.

"No," she responded, "I don't want to talk about it!"

"I sense you had a difficult experience. If there's ever a time when you'd like to talk about that or what your future relationship with God might be," I offered, "I'd be happy to discuss that with you."

"Thanks," she said, "but not now."

Jake and Ann are at different places in their spiritual lives. God has undoubtedly been working with both of them, but they've chosen to respond in different ways. The Christian witness must understand where people are in their spiritual journey. All people, however, have spiritual longings. God made us each that way. Sometimes we imagine those longings to be simply of human origin. But God places those desires within the human heart. Those longings can become sources of spiritual openness. Let's examine some of those human desires.
Each person has a need for hope. Without hope, people give up, quit progressing, and in extreme cases, commit suicide. The longing for hope is addressed by a relationship with God. He promises a bright future. He accompanies us on the way. For the person who believes God to be loving, good, and caring, hope always thrives. Apart from God despair reigns.

Another drive within the human spirit is success. The urge to achieve, to accomplish, to create and to find fulfillment pushes humans. Generations before Christ, God understood that strong drive and promises success to those who will live according to His Word (Joshua 1). God reveals Himself to be an accomplice in the drive to success. He facilitates the pursuit of fulfillment. He also directs an individual to seek Him out as a companion on the journey to fulfillment.

People long to be free. East Germans were impaled on the Berlin Wall in their pursuit of freedom, a testimony to the human need for liberty. God has always appealed to the longing for liberty. He said truth is a way to freedom.

There is also a desire for forgiveness. Relationships which are broken cause discomfort until there's restoration. The announcement of forgiveness brings satisfaction to the soul. Repeatedly, the Scripture tells us: forgiveness is available through Jesus Christ.

Akin to forgiveness is the desire for acceptance. Acceptance speaks of friendship and closeness. God's acceptance brings hope and encouragement to the human soul. A close relationship with God reflects a healthy drive. The Scripture speaks of this inner drive for relationship with the themes of family and offers to dine with God. The Scripture's resplendent with "Welcome Home" offers.

Yet another longing is for healing and wholeness. While physical healing was a theme of the Bible, spiritual healing is equally a concern. People want to feel complete and healthy. Sin's damage leaves one desiring divine intervention. The aching heart reflects God urging people to move closer to Him.

The witness is also to discern the workings of the Holy Spirit in the pre-Christian. The Holy Spirit works through the normal transitions of life. For example, the teenage years are often filled with abrupt changes physiologically, socially, educationally, mentally, and spiritually. The Holy Spirit uses this time. Research shows people accept Christ during their teenage years more than at any other point in life.

College is a time of transition. A young adult often leaves home, makes life choices regarding vocational pursuit and even a spouse. Marriage, the arrival of a baby, the empty nest and retirement are other occasions where the Spirit of God deals with people about spiritual things. Natural events, not necessarily crises, are used by God to draw us to Himself. Couples who have a baby are more open to the Gospel for the six months following the birth of the child than at previous times. The disruptions infants bring is not the only factor influencing a young couple to make changes. God's giving of life is capsulized in this tiny human -- symbolic of the life of God.

The wise proclaimer of the Gospel is alert to the changes in the lives of people. The stability of God is always a great theme when people are struck by the vicissitudes of life.

Not only are transitions a time of openness, but so are crises. Loss always brings openness to the Gospel. Loss can come because of death, divorce, bankruptcy. At each of these points, persons recognize they are not in control. Hope may be lost all too quickly.
Strength is needed. Support is longed for. We need someone to help us with the pain. Relocation is another source of crisis. This crisis may be sometimes less painful. When a family moves from one location to another, the support group, the well-traveled trails, and the friendship base changes. At this point, a person is open to evaluate other options. While many people drop out of church and do not get back in a church when they relocate, they are also open to Christian friends. Timely contact with people who have recently moved into an area is an excellent evangelistic approach.

Other reversals in life provoke people to consider the spiritual when previously they may not have given God a thought. Career issues, financial concerns, health matters have a way of changing life's perspectives. People change to meet the changes taking place in their lives. God is a wonderful resource, especially for people in need.

How does the Holy Spirit work in the life of a pre-Christian? God works in the thought life of people. Some thoughts at first may appear to be simply random. Then thoughts take on an orderliness. The pre-Christian begins to recognize the consistency, even though the thoughts may come only occasionally. The thoughts prompted by the Spirit then begin to be tied together in the mind of the person who is thinking about spiritual things. Insight into human nature, into God's working, into a relationship are seen to have their source in God. A common occurrence is to be blind to the source of these thoughts. Being oblivious to God's work is not only the experience of the pre-Christian but the Christian as well.

For example, in Acts 10, the Holy Spirit is dealing with Peter regarding his prejudices against the Gentiles. When Cornelius, a Gentile with an interest in God, sends his messengers to recruit Peter to hold a revival, then and only then does Peter make the connection. The insight into the expansion of the Gospel and the inclusion of the Gentiles in the plan of God captures Peter's mind, changes his behavior, and makes him an advocate for including those who were formerly outcasts.

The Holy Spirit convinces people of sin (John 16:8-15). It's been popular to talk about conviction--the work of God's Spirit to create a sense of guilt within the unbeliever. This is one way that God works. With the rise of moral relativity, however, people are changing the rules. Many excuse adultery as not being a sin. Morality is measured by legality. If something is legal, although it may not be moral, people justify behavior that might be very damaging to others. After all, the behavior was legal. Therefore, they conclude: "It's okay."

Some people do not understand conviction. I went to visit Evelyn, who was residing in a retirement home. Evelyn was alert and reflective; sincere and earnest. As she described her life, her health, and her feelings, she mentioned she feared losing her mind. Surprised by her observation, I asked more questions. She began to describe a recurring sense that things were not right inside. She looked over her past with deep regret and remorse. Feeling she needed reassurance, I started to minimize her feelings as being merely a review of the past, over which we could do nothing. She bristled slightly at my cavalier comment. Catching on that I had made a mistake, I asked her for permission to explore some specifics in her life. She consented. I asked her if some of her regrets would be related to what she felt was her wrongdoing. She lit up, responding eagerly with a yes. Just as quickly as she affirmed her sin, her face clouded with a heavy sense of
responsibility and sadness. I asked her if she had ever heard of the term "conviction." She replied she had not. I explained how God reminded us of our sins so we would come to Him for forgiveness. She said, "Why, I didn't know God did that. But I am confident that's what's happening." My response to her was along these lines: I've got good news and some more good news. First, you're not losing your mind. In fact, your mind is functioning very well, for the Holy Spirit is able to deal with you about your past. And He's calling you into a relationship with Him begun by His accepting His forgiveness. The past can be erased. Your relationship with Him need not be clouded by fear, anxiety, or guilt. In a direct conversation with God, Evelyn prayed for His forgiveness. She was confident He had granted her request.

Another feature of the Holy Spirit's work is His convincing people that judgment will come. People sense the anger of God--His disapproval. That is the negative aspect of the Holy Spirit's work. It is nonetheless a necessary work of God. God does not allow us to be comfortable with our wrongdoing. The inevitable judgment our sins bring causes Him to call attention to the consequences of wrongdoing.

No person is very far away from the conviction that what a person sows, he's going to reap. No one is immune to that ongoing universal principle.

God convinces people to live rightly. People admit to the presence and the desirability of good in the world. Even people who acknowledge they are terrible sinners, try simultaneously to overcome their sin with an abundance of good deeds. Acts of kindness are noted by people universally. Right living is basically winsome and attractive. When a person's life is ended here on earth, those who grieve point to the good done. The work of God unendingly reaffirms right living. God and humans both applaud kind words, acts of mercy, and demonstrations of love.

God also uses dreams and apparitions, an unusual specter. Historically, Jews and Christians have believed God intervenes in the subconscious. He operates at some subliminal level, not altogether definable, but nonetheless real. Just this week, my daughter told of having a dream where everyone was ascending in the Rapture. She became panicky. She was not leaving gravity's hold. When it looked as though everyone else would leave her behind, she began to "lift off." (She admits that in order to catch up, she had to shove off with her right foot.) From her dream she acknowledged a fear of being left behind. She wanted to go along, to be included, to be with God and His family. Dreams are not unusual or infrequent in their spiritual meaning. People will discuss their dreams and their spiritual obligation. God is obviously at work, even while we sleep.

Apparitions are sightings that are unusual and capture the human mind and spirit. On April 19, 1994, a lady was driving on the freeway heading toward Oklahoma City Center. She observed clouds appearing as angels. Suddenly, and with rapid movement, the clouds seemed to surge toward downtown Oklahoma City. She felt and heard some noise. Only later did she discover the angels were flying to the site of the Alfred Murrah building bombing. God is at work in unusual ways to move people spiritually. Our study of the spirit world is in it's initial stages. God is at work in a variety of ways. The witness is to discern the workings of the Spirit in the lives of pre-Christians.

The Christian witness is to become an agent of the divine in the life of the pre-Christian. The Christian witness is to connect the divine workings with the spiritual longings
of people. In the New Testament, this principle was applied by Philip, the lay evangelist, who was used by God to minister to an Ethiopian. The Ethiopian was reading the Bible, but not understanding what was meant. He was seeking to understand God through the words of a prophet. Philip took the opportunity to explain Christ to a man who was thirsting to know more.

One of the temptations of the Christian is simply to go around talking about God. The assumption is: God will honor whatever is spoken. This philosophy overlooks the idea that evangelism is intentional and intentionally connected with the needs of people.

For example, I was visiting with Frenchie, a 67-year-old preacher’s kid. The first day we were talking, Frenchie began to pour out the pain from his teenage years. He had seen within his church hypocrites and caustic people. Their duplicity angered him even now. He spoke with harsh tones. His body stiffened with anger. He condemned the church. He separated himself from Christ. He excused his sinful behavior on the basis of the ungodliness of church people.

After his anger had lessened some, I asked, "Have you ever seen anyone really live the life of godliness?"

"Oh, yes," he responded, "My father was a wonderful man of God." As tears began to fill his eyes, his voice broke with emotion.

"It answers a lot of questions, doesn't it," I observed.

A few things happened in that interview which are worthy of note. First, someone listened to Frenchie’s pain. He had a need to tell. He also felt the need to exonerate his dad, who had been misunderstood and abused verbally. The godly example of his dad, as a model of holiness, connected with a God who was real and winsome. Within 10 weeks, Frenchie told his pastor he’d accepted the Lord.

The witness skillfully discerns the prevenient workings of the Holy Spirit. As God’s work is discerned, then the Christian witness is able to follow the appropriate role as an effective spiritual guide. The witness must connect divine workings with the spiritual longings of people. The communication of the Gospel is then shaped to minister to the human longings.