

Why We Are Uncomfortable with Evangelism—and What We Can Do About It

By John Bowen

The Anglican Church of Canada has been suspicious of evangelism for a long time. When the Lambeth Conference of Bishops decided in 1988 that the 1990s would be a Decade of Evangelism,¹ there was a mixed response. For Anglican provinces that were already involved in evangelism, the call really made little difference. For others, like Canada, even the word was a challenge, and it came to be called “the e-word.”² Michael Peers was Primate at the time, and he called together some leaders from across the country to decide how to respond. I was privileged to be part of this “Primate’s Evangelism Commission.” One outcome was that we planned and ran three conferences across the country to teach and challenge Anglicans about evangelism.

In his opening speech at the first conference in Aylmer, Quebec, the Primate said, “I feel like Peter at the end of John’s Gospel, where Jesus warns him, ‘When you are old, others will bind you and take you where you do not wish to go.’ That’s how I feel. Now I am old, I am being bound and carried somewhere I do not wish to go—evangelism!” There was much sympathetic laughter: we knew what he meant, and it was a relief to hear our leader say it out loud.

What is the problem?

Negative images of evangelism: When I speak or teach about evangelism, I will often ask folk what images they have of evangelism. Most of the time, the answers I received are negative: street evangelists haranguing busy shoppers, TV evangelists pleading for money, scandals involving evangelists, emotional manipulation of vulnerable people. We have few if any positive models of evangelism.³

1 <https://www.anglicancommunion.org/resources/document-library/lambeth-conference/1988/resolution-43-decade-of-evangelism?author=Lambeth+Conference&year=1988>. Harold Percy reviewed the Decade in January 1999 here: <https://institute.wycliffecollege.ca/1999/01/reviewing-the-decade-of-evangelism>.

2 <https://livingchurch.org/covenant/the-e-word>. I narrated a video for Anglican Video also entitled “The E-word.”

3 When I was an itinerant evangelist in Canadian universities around the turn of the millennium, one of the nicest compliments I was ever paid was when people told me my presentations were very respectful and gentle. Not that I can take much credit for that. Those were among the qualities my role models—most of them Anglican clergy, people like David Watson, John Stott, and Michael Green—demonstrated when as a student I encountered them speaking on university campuses in Britain. I never met C.S. Lewis, but his evangelistic writings have also been a fine model.

And yet, if we are Christians, we have actually been evangelized—we have heard the Gospel and we have embraced it. The evangelism was “successful,” if I may put it that way. When I say we have been evangelized, I mean that someone—a parent, a godparent, a priest, or a Sunday school teacher—long ago explained to us about Jesus and his salvation, and we have maintained that faith (doubtless through many ups and downs) over the years. We do not think of that as evangelism, probably because it was natural, gentle, and friendly—but it was. The best evangelism is always natural, gentle, and friendly.

We are afraid of imposing our beliefs on others: In part, this is a legitimate concern. It is possible to “evangelize” someone in a way that is disrespectful. We may talk without listening. We may treat the other person as a project. We may assume they know nothing of God and have no experience of grace. All these things are possible and should be anathema to anyone attempting to practice evangelism.

And yet. And yet. Elmer Thiessen, writing about the ethics of evangelism, argues that evangelism is a natural human instinct.⁴ We have all been on the receiving end of evangelism—and not only in the church—and we have not usually resented it or found it offensive. “Have you seen this movie (or read this novel, or tried this restaurant, or met this friend)? Oh, you really need to check it out!” It’s the kind of thing that friends are always saying to one another: “I have good news I think you will really appreciate.” Indeed, it’s one of the best ways to find out about things. Without that, we might never receive a recommendation of something new, and we would miss out on a lot.⁵

People may be offended by the Christian message—and there is lots to be offended by, whether it be the focus on a Saviour who died a criminal’s death, or the invitation to surrender our personal ambitions in order to become co-workers with our Creator. But there should be no grounds for being offended by anything else in the demeanour of the messenger!

We rationalize that actions speak louder than words: People love to quote St Francis: “Preach the Gospel by all means. If necessary, use words.” However, it is historically implausible that he ever said it. Francis was known for his preaching, and he taught the Franciscans to preach.⁶ Certainly he lived the Gospel, but he didn’t hesitate to preach it verbally. The two went hand in hand.

In that, as in much else, Francis was simply imitating Jesus, who healed *and* preached, hugged lepers *and* taught, welcomed the marginalized *and* talked about why he did it. In Jesus, words and actions were integrated. While it is certainly true that words without actions ring hollow, at the same time, actions without words can be ambiguous. There used to be a CBC slogan, “Sometimes a picture

4 Elmer J. Thiessen, *The Ethics of Evangelism: A Philosophical defense of Proselytizing and Persuasion*. InterVarsity Press 2011. 15-17. His argument is that there is a good and bad evangelism (or proselytization) and that Christians (and others) need to take care to practice the former.

5 A former CEO of Starbucks proclaimed that he wanted every Starbucks customer to become “a Starbucks evangelist.” That, perhaps surprisingly, shows a good understanding of what evangelism is and how it works.

6 <https://institute.wycliffecollege.ca/2015/09/if-necessary-use-words-really>.

needs a thousand words”—very suitable when you are trying to justify the importance of radio, but equally applicable to the Christian story—which is, after all, a story which needs telling!⁷

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann is no evangelical, but he is very clear about this:

At the centre of the act of evangelism is the message announced, a verbal, out-loud assertion of something decisive not known until this moment of utterance. There is no way that anyone, including an embarrassed liberal, can avoid this lean, decisive assertion which is the heart of evangelism.⁸

That leads to a deeper issue:

We don't know the Gospel: I spent almost twenty years teaching evangelism and related subjects at Wycliffe College in Toronto. One thing I learned quite quickly is that the main reason people don't engage in evangelism is that they have no idea of the evangel—the Greek word for Gospel or good news (the origin of our word evangelism). As a result, we would always spend the first part of the semester talking, not about evangelism and how to do it (or not to do it), but about the length and breadth and height and depth of the good news of God in Jesus Christ.

Evangelism simply means explaining the good news that is at the heart of Christianity, and inviting people to be a part of it. I once asked a young church planter what he thought the Gospel was. Without a moment's hesitation, he replied, "God is changing everything, and you can be a part of it." There are many ways to express that same truth. Jesus himself used the image of Kingdom.⁹ The term may be problematic for us, but for first-century Judeans, "kingdom" spoke of the Creator's promise to intervene in human affairs to overthrow worldly "kingdoms" and put right all that was wrong in the world!

St Paul uses different language to explain the same thing. For instance, he uses the language of reconciliation, something Canadians have been learning about in recent years. "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them." There's the good news! But then he adds, "entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us." And finally: "we entreat you on behalf of Christ: Be reconciled to God." There's Paul the evangelist at work!¹⁰

7 J.I.Packer pointed out that "Whoever could have guessed, without being told that the man Jesus was God incarnate, that he had created the world in which he was crucified [and] that by dying a criminal's death he put away the sins of mankind...?"

8 Walter Brueggemann, *Biblical Perspectives on Evangelism*, 14.

9 The word is used in the Gospels 117 times (fifty-three times in Matthew alone), far more often than (say) love, which occurs only 66 times altogether!

10 I have written at greater length about this in *The Unfolding Gospel: How the Good News Makes Sense of Discipleship, Church, Mission, and Everything Else*, Fortress 2021, 9-29.

We don't know how to express our faith: Michael Peers may have articulated our uneasiness with evangelism, but he was equally clear that he himself had been evangelized. When he was an undergraduate at UBC, a fellow student invited him to church. Michael went with his friend—and that was the turning point of his life.

Evangelism is always a process, taking months or even years, and different people play a part in that process, helping people move closer to faith step by step. Some will simply show Christ-like kindness. Others will tell something of how their faith helps them in everyday life. Some will be able to invite a friend to church or another church-related event. And some are gifted at explaining the fulness of the message and inviting people to respond. We have to play the part in the process of evangelism that we are gifted to do.

Indeed, any time a priest does baptismal preparation, they are engaging in evangelism. Consider the questions that are asked in baptism: Do you renounce all sinful desires that draw you from the love of God? Do you turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as your Saviour? Do you put your whole trust in his grace and love? Do you promise to obey him as your Lord?¹¹ Anyone who has spent time teaching what those questions (and the answers) mean has done “the work of an evangelist,”¹² possibly without knowing it.

Conclusion

One reason churches are declining is that we are not making new Christians. And one reason we are not making new Christians is that people outside the church have no idea what it means to be a Christian. They have never heard the Good News of Jesus Christ. And the reason they have not heard it is that nobody has told them. In other words, we don't do evangelism.

As Harold Percy was fond of saying, it is time to bring evangelism out of the red-light district of the church, and onto Main Street.¹³



John Bowen is Professor Emeritus of Evangelism at Wycliffe College in Toronto.

11 *The Book of Alternative Services*, Anglican Book Centre 1985, 154.

12 2 Timothy 4:5. Some commentators think the wording suggests that Timothy was not particularly “an evangelist,” but that from time to time he had to perform that role anyway. That would apply to many, both clergy and laity.

13 <https://institute.wycliffecollege.ca/1999/01/reviewing-the-decade-of-evangelism/>.