

OUTSOURCING EVANGELISM?



I semi-reluctantly opened the front door of the building where I worked after having been on vacation. I had no idea I was about to receive a heartfelt reception. I had only stepped a couple feet inside when a particular employee saw me. Her eyes lit up, and she bolted toward me across the sales floor with a huge smile. She threw her arms around me to give me an unexpected bear hug while proclaiming, “I got saved on Sunday, and it’s all because of you!”

Because of me? What had I done? I hadn’t even been here. I had worked with this young lady for two years. She was a single mother who often made poor life choices—one being that her live-in boyfriend did not respect her and didn’t treat her well. Many days she would come to work discouraged, depressed, and emotionally beaten down. She would tell me stories about her relationships and other bad decisions she had made.

However, what I saw in her was an intelligent, hardworking, kindhearted woman who did her best to be a good mom. I frequently told her she deserved better, that she was of great value and should be treated as such. She would often say things like, “I don’t understand why you think that. I’ve done so many things wrong.” I had never overtly “witnessed” to her using the “Romans road,” the “four spiritual laws,” or any other systematized method of sharing the Gospel. In fact, I was hesitant about doing so due to the culture of the organization. But, I had said things like, “When God created you, He created someone worthwhile. He thought so much about you that He took your place and died for you. He paid the penalty for all the bad decisions you’ve made.

He wouldn't have done that if He didn't love you and see value in you. Besides, you're smart and kindhearted. You deserve better."

It was these conversations in which I showed empathy and expressed value, over and over again, that resulted in the dramatic welcome I received that day. Multiple similar encounters happened during my time with that company. I am not putting myself on a pedestal; I'm simply making a larger point.

I once heard a pastor say, "You are our outreach program."

According to a 2012 survey by Lifeway Research, an astonishing 78 percent of believers had not shared their faith with anyone during the previous six months. Apparently, many believers are content to show up on Sunday morning, sing a few songs, pay tithes, and try to live a decent life throughout the week, thinking this is somehow the sum of their Christian experience. Maybe we don't understand the importance of personal evangelism. While we are comfortable telling others about a great movie, a new restaurant, or a good deal, we are reluctant to share the greatest news people could ever hear.

Many of us have relegated evangelism to the church institution. We expect the church to organize official outreach events and programs, invite special speakers, and utilize other methods in efforts to reach the community. Or, we assume the pastoral staff should be bringing others to Christ as a part of their job.

Pastors and leaders sometimes inadvertently communicate this message. For example, how many times have we heard statements such as, "You can help fulfill the Great Commission by financially supporting _____ ministry"? The message being that without doing anything other than giving a few dollars in the offering, Mr. or Mrs. Average Churchgoer has carried out their duty to be witnesses. Often, we will not reach out to our neighbors, coworkers, or relatives, but we'll show up to stuff bags for a school-supplies giveaway and feel we have done our duty. In other words, we have outsourced evangelism. There are a couple problems with this paradigm.

Problem One

First, the Great Commission is intended for all of Jesus' disciples, not just pastors and leaders (Matthew 28:16-20). Have we focused so much on the manifestations and the promised power of the Holy Spirit baptism that we have forgotten its purpose? Before the tongues of fire manifested in Acts 2, Jesus said, "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses" (1:8 NIV). There were 120 people in the Upper Room on the Day of Pentecost, not just the leaders.

At no time did Jesus ever say anything like, "And you shall organize outreach events . . . schedule Christian concerts . . . or support someone else's ministry . . . when the Holy Spirit comes upon you."

Please do not misunderstand me. There is nothing wrong with efforts such as these. The issue is when we support such things and then feel alleviated from our personal responsibility to share the Good News with people we care about.

An often-overlooked passage in Acts 8 illustrates my point: “At that time a great persecution arose against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. . . . Therefore those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word” (vv. 1, 4 NKJV).

Did you catch that? The apostles stayed in Jerusalem when everyone else was scattered. It was the scattered ones who went “everywhere preaching the word.” You might have thought only a select few are called to preach; but, according to this verse, everyone is. In this context, preaching simply means, “proclaiming the Good News.” Unidentified, everyday believers helped to win people to Christ and thereby grow the Church.

Problem Two

What is the second challenge with outsourcing evangelism? Even with all the phenomenal means of outreach provided by the church, a recent study revealed that nearly two-thirds of believers said it was a relative, a friend, or a coworker who led them to Christ, not an outreach event (biola.edu/blogs/good-book-blog/2014). After extensive research, George Barna concluded, “A majority of salvation decisions come in direct response to an invitation given by a family member or friend” (barna.com/research/evangelism).

In other words, personal relationships and one-on-one conversations remain the number-one bridge to faith in Christ. It certainly was the case for me. Not being brought up in a Christian home, I was not interested in going to church or a special event. But when my brother returned from the military as a believer, his care and his message changed my life.

When asked about his church’s outreach program, I once heard a pastor say, “You are our outreach program.” I think he was onto something.

I’m not talking about canvassing neighborhoods or “shotgunning” the Gospel to strangers. The key word in this research is relationships. People listen to those they are in relationship with. They trust people who care. As Theodore Roosevelt said, “People don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care.”

Two things were evident concerning that experience with my coworker. First, my life has been so dramatically impacted by the love of Christ that I feel compelled to communicate His great love to others. Second, she was not a “project” to me. My message was about her value. My words penetrated her heart only after she knew that I cared.

The greatest influence we can have is to simply love the people around us. It should be a natural outflow of our love for God that we would love people enough to share the news of Christ’s great love for them (Mark 12:30-31).

If we as the Church are going to impact the world, we as individual believers must not refuse, relinquish, or outsource this calling.

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