

Total Church, *Evangelism*¹

John was playing squash with an unbelieving colleague who has recently joined the company. They had had a couple of brief chats over a coffee in the cafeteria. Simon was new to the area and so welcomed the chance to do something social and John seemed to be an 'okay sort of bloke'. During the game, Simon got hit by a ball and began jumping around the court in pain. Over a drink in the lounge after the game, John and his workmate are talking about their match. The incident with the ball is mentioned, and John responds: 'It's hard when it comes at that speed. It's happened to me loads. I once knew someone who got it straight in the eye. But have you ever noticed how God seems to play hardball with us in life? It's often far more painful than a squash ball hitting you: redundancy; bereavement; rejection! The list is endless, but how do you respond Simon, when those life balls feel like they are hitting you like a rabbit punch to the kidney?'

What response does this evangelistic model provoke? Perhaps you are particularly sensitive to cringe, and John's lead-in line registers high on the scale. Perhaps you find yourself reluctantly admiring his courage and commitment. It is almost impossible to talk about evangelism without people groaning inwardly! Christians whose love for the Lord Jesus flows from new hearts kept soft by the Holy Spirit have an instinctive desire to commend their Saviour to others. At the very least, we want to speak of him to those who do not love him because we want God to be honored. The task of evangelism itself, however, is often a different story. Somewhere in the moment, for many of us, the passion evaporates like a mist in the morning sun.

Our conviction is that Christians are called to a dual fidelity: fidelity to the core content of the gospel accompanied by the fidelity to the primary context of a believing community. To ignore or minimize either is not merely to hamstring the task of evangelism; it is effectively to deconstruct it.

THE GOSPEL WORD IS CENTRAL IN EVANGELISM

Francis of Assisi is alleged to have said: 'Preach the gospel always; if necessary using words.' It may be a great medieval soundbite, but it falls short of what the Bible teaches about evangelism. Jesus began his public ministry by 'proclaiming the good news of God' (Mark 1:14). When he gained a reputation as a miracle worker, his response was to leave that area so that he should give himself to the task of proclaiming for "that is what I have come" (Mark 1:38). And the risen Lord left his disciples with the specific commission to go to the nations, 'teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you' (Matthew 28:20).

There is a tendency in some quarters today to promote a kind of evangelism without proclamation. Acts of service are done or people are invited to experience Christian worship. But without word of explanation these are like signposts pointing nowhere or, worse still, signposts pointing to our good works. The gospel is good news: a message to be proclaimed, a truth to be taught, a word to be spoken and a story to be told.

The message that Jesus proclaimed was: 'The kingdom of God is near.' And with this message came the call: 'Repent and believe the good news!' (Mark 1:15). With the coming of the messianic King, a new age had dawned. Jesus demonstrated the veracity of his proclamation of God's kingship through his words and deeds, culminating in his crucifixion and resurrection. On the cross the King takes upon himself the consequences of our rebellion. As a result, the King graciously commands people to submit in faith and repentance to his lordship so that they might experience his reign of life and freedom. God is at the centre of the gospel word. Yet much evangelism tends to place people in that position. The gospel becomes skewed towards *me* and how Jesus meets *my* needs. But the gospel Jesus proclaimed is about God exercising his life-giving rule through his Messiah for his glory.

¹ Tim Chester and Steve Timmis, *Total Church* (Nottingham: InterVarsity Press), 2007, 51-66.

On the squash court John's bold evangelism effort certainly does not contradict this in terms of its content. In fact, it could be argued that in asserting the sovereignty of God in life he was announcing the gospel of the kingdom. Legitimate questions remain, however, about John's approach. He hardly knew his colleague. His entry point was strained and tenuous. He had no real idea who his acquaintance was. He made no attempt at building a relationship with him. No questions had been asked of John and no invitation given to him to discuss the big questions of life. John had not earned the right to speak the gospel word to his potential friend.

What is the scenario had gone something like this?

After the game John and Simon sat in the bar. The conversation was initially a little awkward, but John took a real interest in his colleague: where he had come from and what family he had. It emerged that they had a few things in common including a shared interest in fast cars. As they were walking out, Simon said: "Would you like to come to a barbecue with me tomorrow night after work?"

THE GOSPEL COMMUNITY IS CENTRAL IN EVANGELISM

The gospel word and the gospel community are closely connected. The word creates and nourishes the community while the community proclaims and embodies the word. The church is the mother of all believers, Calvin asserted, in that she 'brings them to new birth by the Word of God, educates and nourishes them all their life, strengthens them and finally leads them to complete perfection'.² Martin Luther believed that 'The church...is constituted by the Word'. He also likened the church to a mother 'who gives birth to you and bears you through the Word'.³ By her life, created and shaped by the gospel, the church reveals the nature of the inbreaking rule of God. By that gospel life and proclamation, she calls the nations to worship God.

Jesus asserted the centrality of the gospel community in the evangelistic task during his final night on earth. In John 13 he predicts his betrayal. For Jesus it means new responsibilities and their primary responsibility is to love one another (vv.33-35). At this crucial moment in the purposes of God, Jesus is concerned for the mutual love of these people. This must mean that love is crucial! Jesus' exhortation is not vague (vv. 1, 14-17). They are to love *in the same way and to the same extent* that he has loved them. And the gauge of that love will prove to be the cross.

What is the purpose of this mutual, self-giving love? Don Carson says: 'The new command is not only the obligation of the new community to respond to the God who has loved them and set them free by the offering of his Son. Neither is it merely their response to his gracious choice of them as his people. It is a privilege, which when rightly lived out, proclaims the true God before a watching world. That is why Jesus ends his injunction with the words: All men will know you are my disciples if you love another.'⁴ Before they are preachers, leaders or church planters, the disciples are to be lovers! This is the test of whether or not they have known Jesus.

It remains the case today: this cross-love is the primary, dynamic test of whether or not we have understood the gospel word and experienced its power. Not our doctrinal orthodoxy, as important as that is. Not our ingenious strategizing, as fascinating as that is. Not our commitment to preaching, as vital as that is. Not our innovative approach to planting, as radical as that may be. It is our cross-love for each other that proclaims the truth of the gospel to a watching and skeptical world. Our love for one another, to the extent that it imitates and conforms to the cross-love of Jesus for us, is evangelism.

² John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries: The Second Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians and the Epistles to Timothy, Titus and Philemon*, trans. T.A. Smail (St Andrew Press, 1964), p. 231.

³ Cited in Timothy George, *Theology of the Reformers* (Apollos, 1988), p. 89.

⁴ Don Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (IVP, 1991), p. 485, emphasis added.

In the alternative scenario for John and Simon, John was treating Simon like a person and taking a genuine interest in his colleague. Although John would have wanted Simon to hear about Jesus, his commitment to him was not dependent upon his readiness to listen to the gospel word. In that way, John was imitating Jesus who responded to people, treating them accordingly to their circumstances.

In 1 Thessalonians 2, Paul describes his ministry among the Thessalonians: ‘We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us’ (2:8). We can identify forms of evangelism that involve sharing God’s word without sharing our lives: some forms of door-to-door and street work, for example. We can also think of sharing our lives without ever having the courage to share God’s word. Paul’s ministry involved both: sharing his life and sharing the word of God.

Matt rang to ask what he should do. His friend George had asked him to go street preaching. Matt wasn’t interested, but didn’t know how to respond. So the three of us got together. As the conversation began, it was clear that George thought we were selling out in some way. But as we talked about sharing our lives with unbelievers, about evangelism that was 24/7, about opening our homes, George’s tone changed. At the end of our conversation he admitted, ‘I’m not sure if I’m up for that kind of commitment.’

People want a form of evangelism they can stick in their schedule, switch off and go home from. Jesus calls us to a lifestyle of love. Yet the new command of Jesus suggests that, whatever advances John made in the second scenario, there is a further vital dimension.

As they were walking out, Simon said: ‘Would you like to come over for a barbecue tomorrow night after work?’ Sorry, I can’t,’ said John, ‘but you could come to ours. We’ve already got a few friends coming over and it would be great if you came too.’ Simons hesitated, ‘I wouldn’t want to intrude,’ he said. ‘Also I’d feel a bit awkward – I don’t know anyone, Some other time maybe.’ ‘Guess so,’ said John, ‘but I know a couple of my friends are brining their friends I don’t know. It’s just the kind of thing we do!’ Simon smiled: ‘What the heck, you only live once! I’ll bring a bottle.’

Ideally evangelism is not something to be undertaken in isolation. Of course, if opportunity presents itself, the gospel word should be spoken clearly and sensitively in conscious dependence upon the Holy Spirit – whenever, wherever and to whomever. But evangelism is *best* done out of the context of a gospel community whose corporate life demonstrates the reality of the word that gave her life.

Christian community is a vital part Christian mission. Mission takes place as people see our love for one another. We all know that the gospel is communicated both through the words that we say and the lives we live. What Jesus says is that it is the life we live *together* that counts. Jesus prays that those who believe in the gospel ‘may be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.’ (John 17:20-23). The world will know that Jesus is the Son of God sent by God to be Saviour of the world through the community of believers. ‘No-one has ever seen God,’ say John in his Gospel, ‘but God the One and Only, who is at the Father’s side, has made him known’ (John 1:18). The invisible God is made visible through the Son of God. ‘No-one has even seen God;’ says John again in his first letter, but if we love one another, God lives us and his love is made complete is us’ (1 John 4:12). The invisible God is made visible through the love of the people of God. The life of the Christian community is part of the way by which the gospel is communicated. Leslie Newbigin describes the local congregation as “the hermeneutic of the gospel’ – the way in which people understand the gospel.⁵

We need to be communities of love. And we need to be seen to be communities of love. People need to encounter the church as a network of relationships rather than a meeting you attend or a place you enter. Mission must involve not only contact between unbelievers and individual Christians, but between unbelievers and the Christian community. We want to build relationships with unbelievers.

⁵ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (SPCK, 1989), pp. 222-233.

But we also need to introduce people to the network of relationships that make up that believing community so that they can see Christian community in action.

In our experience people are often attracted to the Christian community before they are attracted to the Christian message. If a believing community is a persuasive apologetic for the gospel then people need to be included to see that apologetic at work. People often tell me how they have tried telling their unbelieving friends about Jesus, but they do not seem interested. So they want to know what to do next. My answer is to find ways of introducing them to the Christian community. The life of the Christian community provokes a response. When Peter says 'Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give a reason for the hope that you have', he is not speaking to individuals, but to churches (1 Peter 3:15). Too much evangelism is an attempt to answer questions people are not asking. Let them experience the life of the Christian community. The church is the home in which God dwells by his Spirit (Ephesians 2:22). Its life is the life of the Spirit. Let our relationships provoke questions. And do not worry if your church life is sometimes less than perfect than it should be! We do not witness to good works, but to the grace of God. Our commitments to one another despite our difference and/or grace towards one another's failures are more eloquent testimony to the grace of God than any pretence at perfection.

Al and Lyssa met when they both volunteered in a local charity chop. Al had grown up in a non-Christian home and was indifferent to Christianity. But when Lyssa invited him to a regular game night in their home, he readily agreed. It was Al's first introduction to our Christian community. He came a few times, attended church on one occasion and then stopped. A year or so later someone bumped into Al and invited him along. He became a regular at the games night. He started joining in with other things we were doing as a community. He had long since stopped being Lyssa's friend – he had got to know us all. He started asking questions, attending church and coming to Bible studies. Six months later he was baptized.

I recently received the following email:

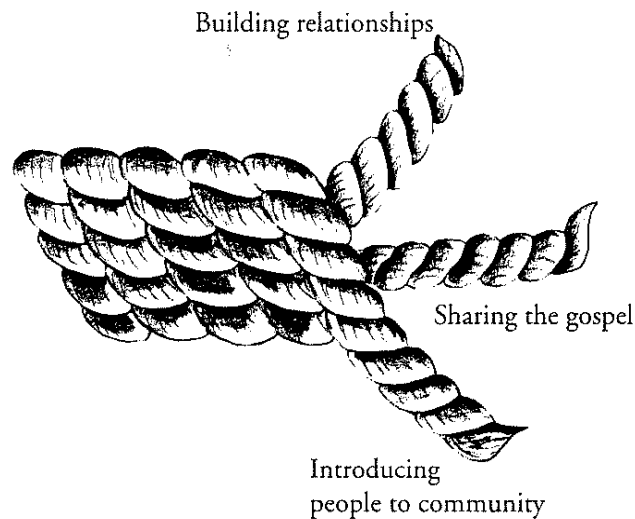
I was talking with a Chinese non-Christian yesterday. He told how he'd done a Bible course when he first came to the UK, but had understood almost none of it. A year later, he now wants to study the Bible. He told me it's because he's seen the lives we live and the decisions we make. He commented that everywhere else, in China and the UK, people try to find happiness in money. But he's noticed that we aren't chasing those things. We don't work all hours for money and possessions. We don't find our identity in our jobs and careers like so many people he knows back home in China. I was able to give up my job in the bank [to have more time for ministry], something he says most people in China would find unbelievable. So he has concluded that this is real happiness and he wants to know about. Next week we'll start going through the Bible story together.

THE THREE STRANDS OF EVANGELISM

In our evangelism, we have developed a simple model to encapsulate the convictions:

- Building Relationships
- Sharing the Gospel
- Introducing people to community

Like three strands of a piece of rope, our approach to mission should involve these three elements.



Think about the people you are trying to reach with the gospel or would like to start reaching. Identify ideas (often very ordinary ideas) for building relationships with them, sharing the gospel message *and* introducing them to the network of believing relationships. Introductions might involve nothing more sophisticated than inviting both Christians and non-Christian friends round for a meal or an evening out. It is not enough to build a relationship between one believer and one unbeliever.

When considering this model, it is important to avoid imposing a supposed logical sequence. Often people ask which comes first: 'introducing people to community', 'sharing the gospel' or 'building relationships'. None need to be the first; nor need progress be made in one area before you can move into one of the others. In reality, any one of the three can occur first, and all three can sometimes begin to happen simultaneously. If one strand is missing, then, in God's sovereign plan, the rope can still hold. But it is stronger when all three are present.

A COMMUNITY PROJECT

So often the call to evangelism produces guilt and despondency. This will be due in part to ungodly attitudes such as pride and the 'fear of man'. Paul is clear in 1 Corinthians that we have a foolish message to proclaim in a foolish manner (1:18-2:5). So evangelism often makes us look foolish and few people relish that prospect.

However, not all of us are eloquent or engaging. Not everyone can think on their feet. Some people are simply not good at speaking to strangers and forming new relationships. One of the practical benefits of the three-strand model of evangelism is that it gives a role to all of God's people. By making evangelism a community project, it also takes seriously the sovereign work of the Holy Spirit in distributing a variety of gifts among his people. Everyone has a part to play: the new Christian, the introvert, the extrovert, the eloquent, the stuttering, the intelligent, the awkward. I may be the one who has begun to build a relationship with my neighbour, but in introducing him to community, it is someone else who shares the gospel with him. That is not only legitimate; it is positively thrilling!

Pete may never share the gospel verbally with Duncan, but his welcome and love are an integral part of the evangelistic process and should be honoured as such. Meanwhile Susan can make friends and introduce them to the community confident that others will present them – at an appropriate point in an appropriate way – with the challenges of the gospel. It is lovely to think of us making up for one another's deficiencies with our collective community strengths.

If evangelism is a community project, our different gifts and personalities can complement one another. Some people are good at building relationships with new people. Some are socialites – the ones who will organize a trip or an activity. Some people are great at hospitality. Some are good at initiating gospel conversations. Some are good at confronting heart issues. In each case I can think of individuals in our small congregation who fit the bill. I am not good at any of these things. I was the one who did evangelistic Bible studies with Al. At the end I said: ‘You ought to be baptized’ and he said ‘okay’. Simple as that! But I would *never* have got that far if I had not been part of a team.

Simon walked a little nervously around the back of the house and into the garden. He was glad to find that only a handful of people had arrived and looked around for John. A relieved grin spread over his face as he heard John’s voice, ‘Simon, great to see you. Hey everyone, this is Simon. Ask him to show you the bruise on the back of his leg!’

It wasn’t too long into the evening before Simon realized that quite a few were Christians. He’d never know so many, but they seemed okay. He was actually enjoying the evening and wasn’t opposed to watching the game with them at the weekend when they’d suggested it. He struggles to put his finger on it, but there was a sort of underlying gentleness in the way they related. He hadn’t experience it before. ‘Cool,’ he found himself thinking, though he wasn’t at all sure what to make of the conversation about Jesus!

ORDINARY LIFE, GOSPEL INTENTIONALITY

Major events have a role to play in church life, but the bedrock of gospel ministry is low key, ordinary, day-to-day work which often goes unseen. Most gospel ministry involves *ordinary people doing ordinary things* with gospel intentionality. Whether it is helping a friend, working at the office or going to the cinema, there is a commitment to building relationships, modeling the Christian faith and talking about the gospel as a natural part of conversation. People often ask if they can come to see our ministry at The Crowded House. But all there is to see is ordinary people doing ordinary things. There are no projects, no programmes, no ‘ministries’.

But the ‘ordinary’ is only a vehicle for Christian mission if there is *gospel intentionality*. The ordinary needs to be saturated with commitments to living and proclaiming the gospel. The gospel is a message, and so mission only takes place as we share that word with people. A commitment to mission through community works only if the priority of the gospel is a strong value within that community. Otherwise we simply form good relationships that never go anywhere. We may even hesitate to share the gospel for fear of jeopardizing those relationships. We fear that if we talk about Jesus, people will not want to be our friends, and that relationship will be broken. Indeed that may happen. And so we need to have the priority of the gospel clear in our minds. This does not mean ramming it down people’s throats at the first opportunity. It does, however, mean aiming clearly to reach the point where we can open the Bible with people.

In a poor area of our city there is a Christian coffee shop. Whenever I walk past, it is all empty. A few doors down is a Kurdish restaurant. Up some treacherous stairs at the back is a smoked-filled games room where Kurdish men hang out. Some Christians have begun frequenting it; drinking sweet tea, playing backgammon, building relationships. Many gospel opportunities have followed. Whether it is projects, cafes, events, centres, we often assume we need to organize something. For many Christians, especially in smaller churches, it makes evangelism and social involvement seem beyond them. They do not have the resources of time and money required. But there is plenty of scope to join, attend, visit, participate. Often this approach is more effective. We meet people on their territory rather than making them come onto our territory. What it requires is gospel intentionality.

The need for gospel intentionality means that leaders must work hard to create and reinforce this gospel culture. I remember speaking at a conference about ordinary life with gospel intentionality. Questioner after questioner asked me about the structures that needed to be in place. But you cannot programme ordinary life! ‘When do you do evangelism?’ people asked. ‘When do you pastor one

another?' 'While I do the washing up' did not seem to satisfy them, but it was the only answer I could give! All this requires people who are proactively committed to speaking the gospel to unbelievers (and other Christians). We try to create this culture by regularly teaching our values, celebrating gospel opportunities, setting aside time each Sunday to share what we have been doing, 'commissioning' people as missionaries in their workplaces and social clubs. Above all, we model the culture for one another so that it becomes the normal thing to do. We need Christian communities in which 'God-talk' is normal. This means talking about what we are reading in the Bible, praying together whenever we share needs, delighting together in the gospel, sharing our spiritual struggles, not only with Christians but with unbelievers.

We want our life together to be gospel-saturated. We want to live and talk the gospel as part of our shared life. At the same time we try to make our meetings less strange to unbelievers. We work hard to ensure that everything we do is explained. We want unbelievers to feel comfortable. We want meetings to feel more like family gatherings than religious services. The result is that when people come to a meeting it is not a big culture shock. They experience something similar to what they have already experienced in the life of the community. At the same time, because we have introduced them to the network of believing relationships, they already know half the people. It becomes a much less threatening occasion.

For six months Fiona had been trying to get one of her house mates to come to church. Luke was reluctant to come to a church 'meeting', but he got involved in the community in other ways: going to the cinema, watching football in the pub, sharing meals, jogging and mountain biking. When eventually he first came to a meeting, Fiona wasn't even there. But he already knew 90% of the church. What he experienced was not all that different from what he had done with them before except that they sang some songs and studied the Bible. Luke is now a Christian.

Western culture has become very compartmentalized. We divide our lives into work time, leisure time, family time, church time and mission time. We want to spend more time in evangelism, but because this can happen only at the expense of something else, it never happens. Rethinking evangelism as relationships rather than events radically changes this. Evangelism is not an activity to be squeezed into our busy schedules. It becomes an intention that we carry with us throughout our day. The same is true of church. If church and mission are redefined in relational terms, then work, leisure and family time can all be viewed as gospel activities. Ordinary life becomes pastoral and missional if we have 'gospel intentionality'. Watching a film with friends or looking after a burdened mother's children can simultaneously be family time, leisure, mission and church.

AUTHENTICATING THE GOSPEL

The validity of this three-strand model does not need to be argued for purely on pragmatic grounds. Its primary value is the way it takes the corporate dimension of evangelism seriously. Historically, evangelicals have been so committed to the centrality of the gospel word in evangelism that they can be uneasy about 'conceding' the centrality of the gospel community. Talk of the gospel community authenticating the gospel word creates a certain amount of unease. But this is precisely how the Bible describes the people of God.

In Ephesians Paul describes the mystery of the gospel which has been entrusted to him. This mystery is that, through the gospel, Gentiles are included with the Jews in God's covenant community (2:14-16; 3:6). Paul goes on: '[God's] intent was that now, through church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord' (3:10-11). The Christian community makes God's wisdom known in the heavenly realms. And that is because we are the beginning of God's purposes for the whole cosmos. God is going to bring 'things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ' (1:10). 'He chose us to give us birth through the word of truth,' says James 1:18). We are the first ray of light breaking through into the darkness of a disordered and fractured universe. We are the first sign of a new dawn. The night of Satan's reign is

fading. In C.S. Lewis vivid imagery, the snows of the white witch's winter are melting in Narnia. The church is an outpost of heaven. We are heaven on earth. John Scott says:

The 'mystery' was not an abstraction. It was taking shape before people's eyes. And in this new phenomenon, this new multi-racial humanity, then wisdom of God was being displayed. Indeed the coming into existence of the church as a community of saved and reconciled people is at one and the same time a public demonstration of God's power, grace and wisdom: first of his mighty resurrection power (1:19-2:6), next of his immeasurable grace and kindness (2:7), and now of his manifold wisdom (3:10).⁶

The Holy Spirit brings the church into existence through the gospel word. Through that same gospel word he continues to change people so that they become *less* lovers of self and *more* lovers of God and others. This is the community life that models the gospel because it is the life for which we were made. As non-Christians are exposed to this dynamic, they begin to see that the gospel word is more than a set of propositions to be assented to. They see it as the very power of God for healing and wholeness; as the word that brings life and blessing.

In view of contemporary culture, we should not underestimate the need for authenticity among the people of God. Perhaps this need is greater than when cultures were first introduced to Christianity. The Western world has advantages from a Christian influence stretching back hundreds of years. But this very longevity has also brought disadvantages, including a lack of credibility. People have rejected the gospel word in part because they have not been exposed to a credible gospel community. Churches have often stood aloof from society. Evangelicals have tended to run away from marginalized urban areas to populate more comfortable suburbs. Christians are often perceived as irrelevant and self-righteous. If these perceptions have any basis, we should not point the finger too quickly at people's spiritual blindness. Jesus gives the world the right to judge the sincerity of our profession on the basis of our love for each other. In other words, we should face with humility the challenge of unbelief. Our response should be one of repentance and faith resulting in lives of authentic corporate existence lived boldly before a skeptical and apathetic world.

John was pleased to hear Simon's voice at the other end of the phone. He was even more pleased to learn that Simon had spent the previous day with people from church. But even that didn't prepare him for what Simon was about to tell him: 'I got into a bit of a heavy conversation with Jake and Tracy. Wasn't sure what to make of it at the start, but their answers to my questions made some sort of sense, I guess. The hardest thing to argue with is the kind of lives you all live. I've never seen anything like it. So, I hope you don't mind, but I agreed to start looking at the Bible with them for a couple hours.' Mind? John had to stop himself shouting out Hallelujah! Or at least, hold it in until he's put the phone down.

⁶ John Stott, *The Message of Ephesians* (IVP, 1979), p. 123.