

BOOK 2

EVANGELISM

—
SHARING THE GOSPEL AT WORK

A SERIES OF IN-DEPTH STUDIES ON WORK

THEOLOGY OF WORK

PROJECT

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EVANGELISM



SHARING THE GOSPEL AT WORK

ABOUT

This book is a product of the Theology of Work (TOW) Project. The vision of Theology of Work Project is that every Christian be equipped and committed for work as God intends. A Christian approach makes work more meaningful and productive, benefits society and the people we work with and for, gets us through the challenges we face on the job, draws people to Jesus, and brings glory to God. TOW Project resources are meant to be both theologically rigorous and genuinely practical. We are committed to helping Christians connect the Bible with the lived experience of work in every sphere of society.

Theology of Work Project is the deepest, largest, and most trusted source of biblical, theological, and pastoral material related to work. TOW's cornerstone resource, the *Theology of Work Bible Commentary*, is the only commentary covering what the entire Bible says about work. It is used by over 60 partner organizations, dozens of seminaries, and hundreds of churches. Most TOW materials are available free of charge at www.theologyofwork.org, with a few print-only publications available for purchase at <https://theologyofwork.christianbook.com>.

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INTRODUCTION

The suggestion that every Christian is called to share the gospel is unsettling to most Christians, since most of us don't feel gifted as evangelists. Although it is thrilling to be part of someone's journey to faith, broaching a spiritual conversation with colleagues at work can arouse no small amount of angst.

This might be true of you—and for a lot of understandable reasons. You might feel unprepared to answer the questions you fear colleagues will throw at you. You might feel like broaching spiritual conversations is inappropriate for the workplace—or that's what you've been told. You might feel a bit intimidated by hostile attitudes toward Christianity held by some coworkers. You might think that sharing your faith could create conflict and generate bad feelings with colleagues. You might feel unqualified because—well, you know your faith isn't very exemplary at work.

But what if we understood that being part of someone's journey to faith in Jesus could begin with something as simple as having a cup of coffee with a colleague, encouraging someone who has had a rough week at work, or offering a helping hand to a boss or coworker under stress? What if we truly believed Jesus' words about sharing the gospel with others?

- What if we believed that Jesus authorizes us to act on his behalf to fulfill our calling as his witnesses at work that “all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me” (Matthew 28:18)?
- What if his promise is true that “the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you” (John 14:26)?
- What if we were confident in Christ's presence—that he is with us always and everywhere, in every situation (Matthew 28:20)?

“What if we truly believed Jesus’ words about sharing the gospel with others?”

- What if even in brief interactions and casual mentions of our faith, we knew the Holy Spirit was at work in the hearts and minds of people to “prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment” (John 16:8)?
- What if we knew we didn’t have to be perfect and say just the right things—that it was God’s work to draw people to himself that “no one can come to me unless drawn by the Father” (John 6:44)?
- What if we understood that simply doing a good job at work can turn on the light for coworkers “so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:16)?

This is what early Christians believed and how they saw their role in fulfilling the Great Commission to make disciples of all nations—and it changed the world. It’s the greatest communication success story in human history—how the gospel spread across the Mediterranean world and ultimately to every corner of the earth. Just before his ascension, Jesus outlined his strategic plan for reaching the entire world with the good news of God’s kingdom. He told his followers, And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of

the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:18-20) But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. (Acts 1:8) First-century disciples embraced this mission, and followers of Jesus grew from a few hundred before the day of Pentecost to over six million by the end of the third century¹—considerable growth by anyone’s calculus.

THE MISSION OF SHARING THE GOSPEL

We might be tempted to believe that the exponential growth of the early church was the result of effective preaching by Peter, Paul, and a few other gifted communicators whose occupation was spreading the gospel. Or we might credit Paul’s strategy of targeting key cultural centers and planting churches that could share the gospel throughout the surrounding countryside. These efforts were no doubt noteworthy—after all they’re in the Bible²—but even more so is the fact that early Christians of every ethnicity, gender, and level of society were passionate about extending Christ’s kingdom. They were determined to “act as Christ’s embassy to a rebel world, whatever the consequences.”³

History and the New Testament tell us that the gospel spread like wildfire along trade routes, in public places, and from house to house—or in Greek, from *oikos* to *oikos*. An *oikos* was the basic social and economic unit of the Greco-Roman world—not just a home where a family lived, but the small business of ancient times that included extended family members, workers, and customers who frequented the place.

It was through informal conversations within and between *oikoi* that men and women shared the gospel with friends, relatives,

1 Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), Page 6.

2 Acts 2:14-41; 6:7-10; 11:4-18; 13:13-49; 17:11-12.

3 Michael Greene, *Evangelism in the Early Church*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2003), p. 23.

coworkers, colleagues, customers, students, teachers, and fellow soldiers—through their network of workplace relationships. They were not professional clergy but informal evangelists.

As early as Acts 8 we find that it is not the apostles but the “amateur” missionaries, the men evicted from Jerusalem as a result of the persecution which followed Stephen’s martyrdom, who took the gospel with them wherever they went. ... This must not have been formal preaching, but the informal chattering to friends and chance acquaintances, in homes and wine shops, on walks, and around market stalls. They went everywhere gossiping the gospel; they did it naturally, enthusiastically and with the conviction of those who are not paid to say that sort of thing.⁴

As a result, the workplace became the most strategic venue for evangelism for the early church.

Today, the church of Jesus Christ is experiencing similar exponential growth in the Global South—which raises a question: With over 340,000 churches⁵ and more than 600,000 clergy⁶, and 75 percent of Americans “looking for ways to live a more meaningful life,”⁷ why is the Christian population in the West shrinking while the non-religious population is growing?⁸

As Western culture moves further away from Christ, we might assume that reaching people with the gospel has become more diffi-

4 Michael Greene, *Evangelism in the Early Church*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2003), p. 243.

5 Hartford Institute for Religion Research estimates there are roughly 314,000 protestant congregations and other Christian churches, and 24,000 Catholic and Orthodox churches in the United States. This estimate relies on the 2010 RCMS (Religious Congregations Membership Study) religious congregations census. http://hirr.hartsem.edu/research/fastfacts/fast_facts.html

6 The Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches reported that there were 600,000 clergy serving in various denominations in the United States, not including clergy serving independent churches, not tied to a denomination. http://hirr.hartsem.edu/research/fastfacts/fast_facts.html

7 “Three Trends on Faith, Work and Calling,” Barna Group, February 11, 2014, <https://www.barna.org/barna-update/culture/649-three-major-faith-and-culture-trends-for-2014>

8 “Nones’ on the Rise,” Pew Research Center, October 9, 2012, <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise>. Christians in other countries recognize the huge mission field in America. The United States receives more missionaries than any other country according to Center for the Study of Global Christianity at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary <http://www.gordonconwell.com/netcommunity/CSGCResources/ChristianityinitsGlobalContext.pdf>

cult. In a way this is true. It is certainly harder to get people to visit a church, to listen to a gospel presentation from a stranger, or to attend a crusade. But a door for the gospel remains wide open through personal relationships. In fact, studies show that up to 90 percent of people in a given congregation who come to Christ as adults, do so because of a relationship with one or more Christians outside the four walls of the church.⁹ This is what makes the workplace so strategic. It's where the actual work we do every day can not only contribute to human flourishing, but also give living proof that the gospel really is good news.

WE ARE CALLED TO SERVE AS CHRIST'S AMBASSADORS

Christians of every era are called to be Christ's ambassadors. An ambassador is a personal envoy sent from the head of a state. Just as a head of state sends an ambassador on a diplomatic mission, Christ sends us on a mission to represent him in both words and actions.

We are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. (2 Corinthians 5:20)

The job has two aspects—conveying messages from the sovereign and representing the sovereign personally. Conveying messages requires words, but representing the sovereign personally requires more than words. It also takes action, for example by demonstrating the sovereign's character and acting to accomplish the sovereign's purposes. As Christ's ambassadors, we convey Christ's message of good news and we live in ways that show God's love for the people we encounter at work and everywhere we go.

Jesus' words in Acts 1:8 flesh out this picture of being an ambassador. "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." Jesus does not send his followers to go witnessing, but to be his witnesses. To go witnessing might only mean speaking words about God somewhere away

9 Win and Charles Arn, *The Master's Plan for Making Disciples* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), p. 45–46.

from home, but to be a witness means living a life that shows God's love wherever we are. In fact, we are never commanded in the Bible to go witnessing. To focus on telling before showing disconnects who we are from what we say—and that's a problem. Church historian Michael Greene notes that the early church's impact on the world was dependent on this linkage of the messengers' lives and their words.

It was axiomatic that every Christian was called to be a witness to Christ, not only by life but lip.¹⁰

The connection between belief and behavior runs right through Christian literature. The two cannot be separated without disastrous results. Among them, the end of effective evangelism.¹¹

Notice the order in Paul's instructions to the Colossians, how actions precede spiritual conversation.

Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone. (Colossians 4:5-6, NIV)

When we serve other people through our actions, we bring the love of Jesus to them. Evangelism is not as much about bringing people to Jesus but bringing Jesus to people—to show and then tell. Bringing Jesus to people—serving them—was key to Paul's strategy of bringing people to Jesus. In 1 Corinthians 9:19 he says, "For though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might win more of them." Paul was willing to reach out to people wherever they felt at home in terms of space, language, or history, not make them accommodate themselves to him.¹²

10 Michael Greene, *Evangelism in the Early Church*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2003), p. 246.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 251.

12 Joshua D. Chatraw and Mark D. Allen, *Apologetics at the Cross: An Introduction for Christian Witness in Late Modernism*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2018), p. 188.

“To focus on telling before showing disconnects who we are from what we say—and that’s a problem.”

FOUR WAYS TO SERVE AS CHRIST’S AMBASSADORS AT WORK

What does it look like to be Christ’s ambassador at work—to serve Christ at work and represent him there? While none of us will do these things perfectly, there are four components that make our witness credible to others—competence, character, concern, and wise conversation. We encourage you to consider how God can use these elements to attract others to himself. They are not a formula, a technique, or steps to success, but ways we show that our faith is real to coworkers and colleagues. As we review these concepts ourselves, we consistently see areas where we need to improve. But no one has messed up to the point of hopelessness. In fact, where we’ve made mistakes and can humbly confess our shortcomings, our witness becomes more believable. Even if it were possible to be perfect, people can’t identify with perfect Christians. To be able to identify with us as witnesses, they need to know that we ourselves need grace.

SHARING THE GOSPEL THROUGH COMPETENCE

The first task of ambassadors of Christ in the workplace is to do our work with excellence—because our competence weighs in heavily on our credibility. Competence means doing our best work, putting our heart into it, providing excellent products and services that meet legitimate human needs.

Scripture speaks about the importance of doing good work in a number of places. For example:

Do you see those who are skillful in their work? They will serve kings. (Proverbs 22:29)

Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might. (Ecclesiastes 9:10)

Whatever your task, put yourselves into it, as done for the Lord. (Colossians 3:23)

We should not be surprised that our work is inextricably connected to our witness. Consider the following:

- God is a worker and made mankind in his own image as such. In Genesis chapters 1 and 2, God introduces himself as a worker—a creator, designer, builder, ruler, and real estate developer—and from the beginning, work has been part of God’s intention for the human race. It is integral to being human. God told our first human parents to diligently cultivate and keep the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2:15) to be productive in their work to bring creation to full flower (Genesis 1:28).
- Adam’s very being, future, and identity are bound up with the earth and his work upon it.¹³
- We reflect the image of God through our work. As Christ’s ambassadors, we have the responsibility to embody Christ in our own dynamic vocational contexts. Michael Williams writes, “We exist for the purpose of imaging God, reflecting him into the world, copying something of him into the lives of the people and societies around us.”¹⁴
- The quality of our work and our attitude toward our work tells people a lot about us—and the God we serve. Can you imagine Jesus using substandard materials, performing shoddy

13 Darrell Cosden, *The Heavenly Good of Earthly Work* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2006), p. 91.

14 Michael D. Williams, “First Calling: The Imago Dei and the Order of Creation - Part I” *Presbyterian* 39/1 (Spring 2013) p. 44.

carpentry, or overcharging his customers? Had he done so, customers who heard him teach would have every reason to conclude that his theology was as wobbly as his tables.

- Paul tells us that the products and services we provide to supply the needs of others and shape the development of human life are key ways in which we love our neighbor: “Now concerning love of the brothers and sisters, ... we urge you, beloved, to do so more and more, to aspire to live quietly, to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we directed you, so that you may behave properly toward outsiders and be dependent on no one.” (1 Thessalonians 4:9-12)
- When we do good work, God is glorified. Abraham Kuyper explains, “Wherever man may stand, whatever he may do, to whatever he may apply his hand, in agriculture, in commerce, and in industry, or his mind, in the world of art, and science, he is, in whatsoever it may be, constantly standing before the face of his God, he is employed in the service of his God, he has strictly to obey his God, and above all, he has to aim at the glory of his God.”¹⁵
- Doing good work with a servant’s heart and “as done for the Lord” brings glory to God and goes a long way toward earning us the right to be heard. Conversely, we undermine our witness if we shirk our work, do our work poorly, or work only for our own self-interest.

The bottom line: In the workplace, people judge us first by our work, not our theology. If we want people to pay attention to our faith, we must pay attention to our work.

SHARING THE GOSPEL THROUGH CHARACTER

Character is a second prerequisite for spiritual influence. Every human being is created in God’s image, and instinctively respects the character traits of the God who designed us—true even for those who do not know God. Humankind universally values the

15 Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism* (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2007), p.53

Fruit of the Spirit: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” (Galatians 5:22-23). In Jesus’ day, many people repulsed by the religious leaders were attracted to Jesus because he embodied these characteristics. Today, Christ-like character still engages attention and invites respect.

“Competence, character, and concern together create a powerful apologetic for the gospel and with the Spirit’s nudging can open a door for gospel conversations.”

Non-Christians take note of our joy when we work, our peace in the midst of disappointment, and our graciousness and humility toward people who try our patience. Unfortunately, these are too often in short supply for those of us charged with showing Jesus’ character to the world. In 2013, the Barna Group studied hypocrisy among Christians. Among those who self-identified themselves as Christians, research based on a list of self-selected attitudes and actions found that 51 percent described themselves more like Pharisees (hypocritical, self-righteous, judgmental) as opposed to only 14 percent that modeled the actions and attitudes of Jesus (selfless, empathy, love).¹⁶ C.S. Lewis described the problem,

When we Christians behave badly, or fail to behave well, we

¹⁶ “Christians: More Like Jesus or Pharisees?” The Barna Group, April 30, 2013, <https://www.barna.org/barna-update/faith-spirituality/611-christians-more-like-jesus-or-pharisees>

are making Christianity unbelievable to the outside world. ... Our careless lives set the outer world talking; and we give them grounds for talking in a way that throws doubt on the truth of Christianity.¹⁷

If our words are to mean anything to others, they should flow out of a life of integrity, otherwise our deeds paint our words the color of a lie. Integrity can be especially challenging at work. The pressure to abandon biblical values and follow a different rule of life on Monday can overwhelm thin commitments made in church on Sunday. Christ calls us to live out our Christian values at work as fully as everywhere else, even when we must disadvantage ourselves. When people see that we are not just striking a pose, but humbly seeking to live a life of integrity, they take notice.

People also take notice, not so much when we fail—which we will—but when we fail to admit that we don't have it all together. Perhaps more important than getting things right is admitting that we often get things wrong, seeking forgiveness, and making amends to those we injure. One of the most attractive elements of character is the humility to accept that we're not perfect. Jerram Barrs reminds us of the impact humility can have on others,

So often as Christians we behave as if we have everything to give to the non-Christian and nothing to receive. We imagine that it would be demeaning for us to acknowledge any weakness or need. Christians are supposed to “have it all together,” and we fear that letting unbelievers see that we don't, might bring discredit on us and on the gospel. This is folly, for the truth is that we are always weak and needy and the gospel is not served by pretending otherwise. To acknowledge, as Jesus does, our need of the kindness, gifts, wisdom, or advice an unbeliever can give us is encouraging and ennobling to those who might have been led to expect only scorn or condescension from us.¹⁸

Here's the bottom line. It's not enough to do good work, there has

17 C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, Book IV, Ch 10.

18 Jerram Barrs, *The Heart of the Gospel* (Wheaton, IL: Crossways, 2001), p.199.

to be something attractive about our character. And especially, the ability to admit our failures and brokenness stands out in stark relief to the culture around us. People need to smell the sweet aroma of Jesus' presence in our character, which comes most strongly through the humble character he creates in us.

SHARING THE GOSPEL BY SHOWING CONCERN

When competence and character combine they create trust that lends credibility to our words. When joined by godly concern for others, they give our witness power. It is true; people don't care how much we know until they know how much we care.

Showing concern for others is not an option for followers of Christ. It is what Christians do—the natural outworking of our relationship with a gracious God¹⁹. Kind words and gracious actions that impact others come from within, not from mere obligation or religious duty. When people see our genuine concern, they see Jesus alive in us.

We show concern by our words. What we say and how we say it speaks volumes about who we are, what motivates us, and how much we care about others. The apostle Paul allows little wiggle room when it comes to thoughtless words.

Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. (Ephesians 4:29)

Consider the wisdom about words from the book of Proverbs:

A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger. (Proverbs 15:1)

With patience a ruler may be persuaded, and a soft tongue can break bones. (Prov. 25:15)

19 See 1 Corinthians 1:3-5; Colossians 3:12-14.

The lips of the righteous know what is acceptable, but the mouth of the wicked what is perverse. (Prov. 10:32)

One who gives an honest answer gives a kiss on the lips. (Prov. 24:26)

A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver. (Prov. 25:11)

And even when we must deliver rebuke, we are to “speak the truth in love” (Ephesians 4:15).

“Developing relationships with the people we work around should never be a strategy to manipulate them into a conversation about faith.”

We show concern by listening to others' words. Our willingness to listen and receive input from others sends a powerful message. It says, “I care what you think; you have something valuable to contribute.” When we ask questions and listen with focused attention and a humble spirit, we invite trust and cooperation in our workplace as well as personal relationships.

Let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger. (James 1:19)

We listen not just because it's good leadership or reflects well on us, but because the person speaking is an individual made in the image of God and deserves our respect even when that image has

been distorted.

We show concern by our actions. Gracious speaking and listening should be accompanied by corresponding behavior. The way we respond toward others in the midst of daily stress and success reveals whether we care more about others or ourselves. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus taught his disciples that spiritual leadership is not about doing big things. It is about being a servant.

Jesus called them and said to them, “You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.” (Mark 10:42-45)

Small acts of kindness can light up a dark room or a dark workplace.

Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. (Philippians 2:4.)

Do all things without murmuring and arguing, so that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, in which you shine like stars in the world. (Phil. 2:14-15)

Given the negative perception many people have of Christians, Christianity does not look like a faith most people can relate to, much less benefit from—unless we show them differently by our competence, character, and concern.

Developing relationships with the people we work around should never be a strategy to manipulate them into a conversation about faith, but a way to genuinely grow to love them more deeply and learn how we can serve them.

Here’s the bottom line. Competence, character, and concern together create a powerful apologetic for the gospel and with the Spirit’s nudging can open a door for gospel conversations.

SHARING THE GOSPEL THROUGH WISE CONVERSATION

Generally speaking, people need to trust the messenger before they will trust the message. But make no mistake—we do have a message to be delivered. Yet we need to deliver it wisely. No one comes to Christ by simply observing Christians—in all but rare cases someone has to tell them about Jesus. This certainly does not mean we should be talking about Jesus all the time. But it does mean not hiding our faith and speaking up whenever we recognize that someone is open to learning more.

It's impossible to read the Bible seriously and miss our obligation to make Christ known. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus calls his disciples the light of the world—not something to be concealed.

You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven. (Matthew 5:14-16)

Some Christians take the reported words of St. Francis: “Preach the gospel at all times, and when necessary, use words” as a reason not to talk about their faith with those who need to hear the gospel. They believe that they fulfill Christ’s call to be his witness simply by the way they live—no need to explain why they live the way they do. The person who says naively, “I don’t preach; I just let my life speak,” may not realize what an egotistical claim that is. Who of us lives such a good life that our actions are the only thing needed to witness to the goodness of Jesus?²⁰

Behavior that honors and reflects Christ is a vital part of what it means to be a witness. But being a witness also requires words.

In your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason

for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander. (1 Peter 3:15-16, NIV)

What's often overlooked in Peter's instruction is that doing good to others creates a relationship where people want to ask "Why?" Why do you live the way you do? We give an explanation to those who have seen our godly behavior, recognized our hope, and asked about our faith.

“We are one link in the chain that the Holy Spirit can use at any given time—and it may be a long chain.”

While Peter encourages reluctant witnesses to speak up, he puts a constraint on over-zealous Christians who angle for an opportunity to share the gospel—listener ready or not. While some people have come to Christ absent a relationship—and in rare cases absent a witness—forcing spiritual conversation on someone else usually creates more heat than light. Wise faith conversations are not about getting someone to pray a prayer of salvation, but about reflecting the reality of God's grace to us in Christ and explaining that reality to curious people.

What does wise conversation look like? Here are some elements to consider.

Wise conversation considers the listener's heart condition. In Matthew 13, Jesus describes the human heart as rough terrain for gospel farming. Weeds, rocks, and hard-packed soil thwart implanting of the seed of Truth. It's important for those of us who sow the seed of the gospel to take time to consider the receptivity of our listeners.

Most nonbelieving adults have significant barriers to receiving the gospel, issues that have hardened their hearts and trained them to keep spiritual truth at arm's length. Beside the intellectual issues many have toward Christianity, even more basic and often overlooked are emotional barriers—indifference, mistrust, antagonism, or fear toward Christians or Christianity—negative attitudes that stop spiritual conversation in its tracks.

Sometimes, emotional barriers are caused by negative experiences with religious groups or Christians who are narrow-minded, judgmental, or fanatical. Even well-intentioned Christians who come on too strong can foster mistrust or anger, and inadvertently create more barriers. But ordinary hypocrisy may have turned more hearts away from Jesus than anything else. Hypocritical family members, neighbors, teachers, harden the heart's soil.

Wise Christians stop to consider these barriers before their attempts to explain the gospel are repelled offhand. When people take note of our competence, character, and concern, the Holy Spirit may indeed open a door for us to give the reason for our hope to individuals otherwise reluctant to talk about spiritual truth.

Wise conversation joins where the Holy Spirit is already at work. It's important to find out what the Holy Spirit is doing and join in, rather than try to make something happen ourselves in our own timing. No matter how convincing or powerful our arguments are, we can't raise the spiritually dead. It's God's job to open the heart. And he does that on his time schedule not ours—sometimes surprising us. Just because someone isn't interested in spiritual conversation today doesn't mean that the Spirit can't soften the hardest heart over time.

Antagonism toward God is not a modern problem. Throughout history God's people have taken his truth into hostile cities, nations, and workplaces. But the gospel is never overcome by hostility. God prevails over any strategy the evil one uses to halt the gospel. No manner of worldview, cultural trend, or work environment is too hostile—and no person too hopeless—for the all-sufficient power of the Holy Spirit to reach.

And no matter how passionately we might want a person to come to Christ, remember Christ's own words. "No one can come to me unless drawn by my Father who sent me ..." (John 6:44).

Our job is to help people take one step closer to Christ, leaving the results and timing to God. We are one link in the chain that the Holy Spirit can use at any given time—and it may be a long chain. It's great to be the last link in the chain of a person's faith journey. But if we watch for what the Spirit is doing and join in, we won't be the missing link.

Wise conversation creates curiosity. When we go to work tomorrow as ambassadors for Christ, we need to know the people we work among. What are their interests, their needs, their hopes, their dreams? What will invite them to listen long enough to learn how much God loves them and longs to give them abundant life on earth and eternity in his presence? If we do not take the time to understand our coworkers, doors may close, not open.

Wise conversation should be brief—at first at least. Curiosity about our faith is not automatic. While assessing a person's spiritual interest, long conversations about faith are likely not appropriate or curiosity-building. While a colleague may listen politely, inside they may be plotting their escape and planning to stay clear of this religious fanatic. Instead try to leave people wanting more.

Even questions about such mundane things as our plans for the weekend may offer opportunities for us to invite curiosity. "I'm teaching a Sunday School class on healing and divorce." "I'm headed to a men's retreat with my church." Letting friends at work know what we're doing may create openings for the curious to explore. Our choices and activities tell people more than how we spend our time. They reveal what we love. It may puzzle people and cause them to wonder why with so many choices we would choose Christian activities—which they may consider boring or a waste of time. When their curiosity gets the best of them, they will ask, creating an opportunity to give them a short word of explanation.

They may also ask: How can you believe in God in the middle of

the difficulties you're facing? Why are you so kind to people who are hard to love? Why do you work so hard to help others be successful? How can you believe Jesus is the only way to heaven? Their verbalized curiosity is an invitation to share more of the story of the good news you've experienced in Jesus.

Curiosity can also spring from sharing common ground found in relationship. Jerram Barrs, head of the Francis Schaeffer Institute, advises his students to search for common ground with coworkers, and to begin discussions of faith on those common grounds of agreement. Do they like art? Are they sports fans? What music do they love? Whatever their passion, when we find a common interest, the basis for relationship is formed. From nearly any point of common interest, a part of your story of faith can emerge.²¹

In longer conversations, it's helpful to remember that people become interested in Jesus because of a personal felt need or aspiration. As rational beings we need information, answers, and rational arguments, but that's not all. We are also desiring beings, feeling our way through life trying to find what we're missing without knowing, most of the time, what we're looking for.²² Helping another person see how their deepest longings are met in Christ can create an irresistible curiosity for how Jesus fulfills that yearning.

Tim Keller reflected on a lifetime of talking about Jesus with secular New Yorkers. "Unless people find our conversation about Christ surprisingly compelling (and stereotype breaking) their eyes will simply glaze over when you try to talk to them."²³ Jesus's conversation with Nicodemus (John 3:1-21) and the woman at the well (John 4:4-26) are cases in point. Jesus not only spoke in concepts and language they could understand, he tailored his conversation to answer each person's unique question—their deepest longings. By focusing on their individual interests, he woke their curiosity. We can see how successful he was by the questions they

21 Jerram Barrs, lecture in the class *Apologetics* at Covenant Theological Seminary, St. Louis, February 1997. From lecture notes by Randy Kilgore.

22 Joshua D. Chatraw and Mark D. Allen, *Apologetics at the Cross: An introduction for Christian witness in late modernism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2018), 180.

23 "Defeater Beliefs and a Gospel Sandwich," <https://www.timcasteel.com/2010/10/defeater-beliefs-and-a-gospel-sandwich/>

asked in return.

Ultimately, when people are able to connect the power of the gospel to their deep longings, they will say, “If that were only true!” When they do, we have an open door for the gospel message.

“The gospel is good news about Jesus, which is not that God judges us, but that he loves us and wants to forgive and heal us.”

Wise conversation is positive (usually). When people become curious, they will probably begin to ask questions. Often what they really want to know is hidden behind their words. They may be afraid to ask because they’re concerned that we’ll think less of them. They may also be testing us to sense whether we’re going to come at them like Bible-thumpers. If we answer judgmentally, they’re likely to back off and avoid us like the plague. But if they discover a non-judgmental, honest, genuine response, they’ll be more apt to come back for more, especially if our lives and actions echo the answers we give.

The gospel is good news about Jesus, which is not that God judges us, but that he loves us and wants to forgive and heal us. It shouldn’t surprise us when unbelievers make bad choices. When we aggressively criticize their choices and lifestyles, we can create barriers. This doesn’t mean that we condone sinful behavior, but we remember that conviction is in the Holy Spirit’s job description, not ours.

When he [the Holy Spirit] comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment: in regard to sin, because men do not believe in me; in regard to

righteousness, because I am going to the Father, where you can see me no longer; and in regard to judgment, because the prince of this world now stands condemned. (John 16:8-11, NIV)

We should also take to heart Jesus' response to sinful people. He did not bring judgment on unreligious people. He reserved his sternest words for the religious elite, the Pharisees and Jewish officials of his day. With those outside the realm of this religious aristocracy, Jesus' tone was gentle, humble, and compassionate. Remember his kindness to the woman caught in adultery?

Jesus straightened up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" She said, "No one, sir." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again." (John 8:10-12)

Today, many people keep Jesus at arm's length because they have developed a bad impression of him from his followers. They may think he hates gay people, doesn't like fun, sides with political views they abhor, shuns people who aren't perfect, is a racist, keeps women subordinated, or only cares about what happens to people after they die. These attitudes may be true of some Christians, but not Jesus.

Our unexpected graciousness toward people who assume criticism, can surprise them into curiosity. Peter offers important advice for those who want to help their colleagues take one step closer to a relationship with Christ.

Finally, all of you, have unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another, a tender heart, and a humble mind. Do not repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse; but, on the contrary, repay with a blessing. It is for this that you were called—that you might inherit a blessing. (1 Peter 3:8-9)

Every interaction with every person every day is spiritually significant and we have the opportunity to be a blessing to others, not just when we're insulted or treated poorly, but when we connect with anyone made in the image of God. A smile, a kind word, a word of praise for a job well done can be used by the Spirit to draw

someone one step closer to Jesus.

Wise conversation harnesses the power of story. No one wants to hear a canned speech about Jesus, but most people love a good story. From Genesis to Revelation, the Bible is packed with stories. God could have provided an indexed guidebook for living life on earth. Instead, he gave us the Bible, his inspired word, and filled it with stories, all “useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (2 Timothy 3:16). In fact, the entire Bible is one grand story of redemption.

When Jesus wanted to speak of the Father’s love he didn’t just state the concept; he told an attention-getting story—the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32). When he wanted to help his disciples understand the kingdom of God he used stories that Matthew recorded in his gospel.

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. And he told them many things in parables, saying: “Listen! A sower went out to sow... (Matthew 13:1-3)

Humankind, according to Alasdair MacIntyre, are “story-telling animals.”²⁴ Think about the conversations you recently had at work. How many involved a story? Likely a lot. In evangelism, stories should populate our spiritual conversations with unbelievers. They can shape information into meaning and help others visualize who we are and what we believe. Storytelling portrays truth in a tangible and authentic way. It opens a window for unbelievers to get a glimpse of what it is like to be a person of faith and can give them a reason to rethink negative notions they may hold about Christians or Christianity.

Storytelling is powerful. Rather than using facts to beat on the mind’s front door, which is often bolted from within, a story allows truth to enter through the backdoor of the heart. Stories can generate fresh insight and expand the depth and breadth of per-

24 Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008) 216.

ception while helping us and unbelievers make sense of the world.

Stories are a particularly important avenue for Christians to challenge how unbelievers view the world. By telling an effective story, a Christian can invite an unbeliever to drop their weapons, come in, and listen with an open heart and mind. In this way, stories grant an unparalleled opportunity to challenge an unbeliever's basic assumptions about life.²⁵

“We are talking with people made in the image of God.”

Wise conversation is understandable. When we speak with nonbelievers—or anyone for that matter—we want to be understood. But if we talk about faith in Christian jargon, we create a significant roadblock. Jargon is insider language understood only by people in a group—in this case other Christians. Speaking Christianese can leave our nonbelieving coworkers and friends confused and even repelled.

We cannot assume others understand biblical terms that are rich with meaning for our faith. When speaking with non-Christians, we should avoid terms that could be confusing, misunderstood, or perceived negatively. Keep insider language to a minimum and stop regularly and ask listeners if they are following and to make sure they understand any theological words.

Wise conversation remembers who we are talking to.

²⁵ Joshua D. Chatraw and Mark D. Allen, *Apologetics at the Cross: An introduction for Christian witness in late modernism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2018), 180.

One of the reasons why spiritual conversations are intimidating is that we are talking to dead people—spiritually dead, that is. Paul describes the desperate condition of the human race apart from Christ in Ephesians.

You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else. (Ephesians 2:1-3)

While our conversation should be positive, by its very nature, the gospel is confrontational. According to Tim Keller,

In every gospel presentation, there is an epistemological challenge. People are being told that their understanding of God and ultimate reality is wrong... In Summary, there is truth about God (“you think you know who God is, but you do not”), truth about sin and your need for salvation (“you are trying to save yourself, but you cannot”), truth about Jesus (“he is the messianic King who comes to accomplish your salvation for you”), and a call to respond to these truths by repenting and believing in him.²⁶

If we’re afraid unbelievers will be hostile to the good news of Christ, it’s important to remember that we are talking to men and women who are victims of the enemy, not the enemy themselves. Yes, they can be hostile, but we were enemies of God when he came after us. Yes, they are sinners, but so are we. Yes, they may not know the truth, but we didn’t figure things out on our own. Yes, they may stand for things repugnant to God, but so did we. They may not love God, but God loves them.

And perhaps most important, we are talking with people made in the image of God, no matter how distorted, disfigured, or unrecognizable it may be. That fact demands our respect and de-

serves a dignity not often granted in our fallen world.

Catholic blogger Jennifer Fitz reminds us of how this should impact evangelism.

Evangelization is not about getting other people to do the thing you want them to do. It's not about crafting just the right technique to make that right moment fall together so neatly.

Evangelization is about looking at the person in front of your face, no matter who that person is, and gasping in wonder at the miraculously beautiful creation God has endowed with a dignity and a worth that nothing can erase, no matter how deep in the mire that person is swimming just now. You see that person, and you know for a fact: Here is somebody worth dying for.

And then you try for a few minutes to do something worthy of being in the presence of such a person.²⁷

Wise conversation begins with conversation with God.

While the rapid and far-reaching spread of the gospel in the first century was fueled by the mass mobilization of ordinary Christians, it was empowered by the persistent pattern of prayer. The vital role of prayer in evangelism is recorded throughout the Book of Acts (Acts 1:14; 1:24; 2:42; 2:47; 4:24, 31; 8:15; 9:40; 10:9; 10:30–31; 12:5; 13:3; 14:23; 16:25; 20:36; 21:5; 26:29; 28:8).

As we encounter coworkers and colleagues in the workplace we hope will come to faith we need to remember that evangelism begins and ends with God. He has invited us to partner with him in the privileged mission of reconciling men and women to himself. We do our part modeling godliness and speaking wisely. The rest is in his hands. That's why we talk to Jesus about people before we talk to people about Jesus. Even Paul, as gifted a communicator as he was, needed prayer.

27 "Why Do We Evangelize?" July 3, 2015, <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/jenniferfitz/2015/07/why-do-we-evangelize/#sthash.m9F7sl3a.dpuf>.

Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with thanksgiving. At the same time pray for us as well that God will open to us a door for the word, that we may declare the mystery of Christ, for which I am in prison, so that I may reveal it clearly, as I should. (Colossians 4:2-4)

Note, Paul's prayer is both for unbelievers, that God would open a door for the word—something only God can do—but also for Paul himself, that he would speak clearly.

Wise conversation respects the integrity of the workplace. Is it OK to talk about Jesus at work? Many Christians wonder whether in a spiritually diverse workforce we are allowed to tell people about Jesus. Is it legal? Is it allowed by my company? In general, the answer is “yes,” it is legal to talk about Jesus at work. We will consider the legal situation in the United States, specifically. We recommend that those in other countries learn about the laws where they live.

In general, if a workplace permits any personal conversations and discussions at all—as almost every workplace does—then it must permit religious conversations. So, if someone can talk about family or soccer at work, talk about religion is also permitted. Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 protects workers in most public and private workplaces against discrimination based on religion:

It shall be an unlawful employment practice for an employer -

(1) to fail or refuse to hire or to discharge any individual, or otherwise to discriminate against any individual with respect to his compensation, terms, conditions, or privileges of employment, because of such individual's race, color, religion, sex, or national origin; or

(2) To limit, segregate, or classify his employees or applicants for employment in any way which would deprive or tend to deprive any individual of employment opportunities or otherwise adversely affect his status as an employee, because of

such individual's race, color, religion, sex, or national origin.²⁸

This means, among other things, that if a sincerely held part of our religious beliefs is an obligation to tell others about Jesus, an employer generally cannot prevent us from doing so, unless it would interfere with the work at hand or create a hostile work environment for others. (A hostile work environment occurs when a “workplace is permeated with discriminatory intimidation, ridicule, and insult that is sufficiently severe or pervasive to alter the conditions of the victim’s employment and create an abusive working environment.”²⁹ Don’t do that!)

Despite these legal protections, employers have tended to be inconsistent in their policies regarding evangelism. Sometimes employers are ignorant of employees’ rights in this regard, or choose to disregard them, and enforcement of the law varies. According to Deborah Weinstein, who teaches employment law at the University of Pennsylvania’s Wharton School, “Courts across the country have interpreted this issue very differently. In a 2006 case in California, the court said persistent and blatant proselytization is prohibited because it could constitute harassment. But other courts, in Colorado, for example, have said employers need to bend over backwards to accommodate those who need to proselytize.”³⁰

Of course, if we have to resort to legal rulings in order to talk about God with our co-workers, we may have already lost the chance of gaining any conversation partners. Maybe we should ask why such a restrictive policy exists in the first place. Have we or other Christians engaged in harassment, abuse, improper use of power or other offenses while talking about God? Even if you have the law on your side regarding the right to evangelize, if your tactics aren’t beyond reproach you may risk alienating the very people you’d like to talk with.

28 Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, SEC. 2000e-2. [Section 703], accessed at the website of the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, www.eeoc.gov/laws/statutes/titlevii.cfm, July 18, 2012.

29 EEOC Compliance Manual, Section 12: Religious Discrimination, paragraph 12.I.A.2, July 18, 2012. Note also that the EEOC Compliance manual includes “proselytizing or other forms of religious expression.” as a protected religious observance (12.I.A.1.1); that “the ‘sincerity’ of an employee’s stated religious belief is usually not in dispute” (12.I.A.2) and “the employer should ordinarily assume that an employee’s request for religious accommodation is based on a sincerely-held religious belief” (12.I.A.3).

30 CNN.com International, “Balancing Faith and Business” by Peter Walker, posted Feb. 12, 2007, accessed at <http://edition.cnn.com/2007/BUSINESS/01/31/execed.religion/index.html>, July 18, 2012.

In any case, it is crucial to avoid an imbalance of power when sharing our faith at work. If we have power over others there is the danger that sharing our faith will come across as coercive. People may be afraid to say no to us or ask us to stop. They may even pretend to accept our message for fear their job prospects will be diminished if they don't. Others may suspect that those who accept our message are gaining an advantage at work. The Conference Board—a global business organization—notes, “Because supervisors have the power to hire, fire, or promote, employees may reasonably perceive their supervisors’ religious expression as coercive, even if it was not intended as such.”³¹

“It is crucial to avoid an imbalance of power when sharing our faith at work.”

Some Christians have concluded it is best to avoid proclamation to people in a position of lesser power and to trust God to appoint someone else to share the good news with them. Others believe it is possible for supervisors to share their faith if they pay close attention to preventing detrimental effects. Needless to say, if talking about God would exploit a power imbalance, we shouldn't do it. Err on the side of caution, keeping in mind that people in positions of power almost always underestimate how much that power affects people in positions of lower power. A supervisor might think a casual conversation about faith is not a misuse of power, but how could the supervisor truly know whether the subordinate feels the same way? Asking the subordinate is definitely not a reliable way to find out! One source of further information

31 Charles Mitchell, “Faith at Work: What Does It Mean to Be a ‘Faith-Friendly’ Company,” The Conference Board Executive Action No. 217 (November 2006), 10.

for those who own businesses is the LeTourneau University Center for Faith and Work at <http://centerforfaithandwork.com/LegalProtection>

The bottom line, at least in the United States, is that in almost every workplace we have the right to tell others the good news, as long as we do it in a way that is not offensive, aggressive, or misuses power. Through God's grace this should be eminently possible.

A FINAL ENCOURAGEMENT FOR AMBASSADORS OF CHRIST

As Christ's ambassadors we are key players in the great drama of redemption. God in Christ is reconciling the world to himself and he wants us to join him. He does not need us to carry out his plans, yet he gives us this great privilege. He has invited us to join him in redeeming creation and participating with the Holy Spirit in drawing people to himself. In his infinite wisdom, God ordained that his sovereignty and human responsibility would work together to achieve his purposes. Too grand for our finite minds to comprehend, God calls us to believe this in faith and fulfill our role in his story by making disciples. As workplace followers of Christ we have not only an obligation but an incredible opportunity to foster human flourishing and spread the gospel to the men and women with whom we live and work. None of us is equal to the task, but fortunately God is. God's ability, not our own, is ultimately what gives us confidence in the work of evangelism. "I can do all things through him who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13).

FOR FURTHER READING

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