

Discover Your Evangelism Style

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That was it—I had written off personal evangelism and was ready to invest my time and energy elsewhere. It wasn't that I didn't believe in it anymore. I knew it was important, biblical, and the only way most people would find Christ. Clearly, it was something somebody ought to be doing. But not me. Not anymore.

You see, I'd signed up for a summer-long tour of duty helping a church with evangelism. It was a great church and the people I served with were wonderful. But the primary way we tried to spread the message was through a knock-at-the-door-and-talk-fast-before-they-close-it methodology.

When summer ended and I went home, I was thankful I had signed up but glad it was over. Evangelism, I concluded, is for people with a certain kind of personality and temperament—a kind I clearly didn't have.

Ironically, a year later Willow Creek Community Church in South Barrington, Illinois, hired me as their director of evangelism. Today, nine years later, my life's passion is leading people to Christ and helping others do the same.

What happened during that year? What did I discover that caused such a radical change in the trajectory of my life? In short, I learned I could effectively spread the message of Jesus Christ without having to fit a mold that isn't me. I found out I could become a more contagious Christian while still being myself.

Menacing Misconceptions

I'm convinced that one of the greatest barriers to Christians participating in personal evangelism is their misunderstanding of what it entails. So many of us are fearful of the dreaded "e-word" and view it as an unnatural activity.

Well, here's great news that's both freeing and empowering: *God knew what He was doing when He made you.* He custom-designed you with your unique combination of personality, temperament, talents, and background, and He wants to use you to reach others in a fashion that fits your design.

What might that look like in your life? For an answer, let's consider how God used six people in the New Testament to spread His love and truth. In the process, we'll discover six biblical styles of evangelism. As I describe each one, think about whether it might fit you.

Peter's Confrontational Approach

Peter had a "ready-shoot-aim" personality. Whatever he did, he did it unhesitatingly and full force. When Jesus asked the disciples in Mt. 16:15 who they thought He was, Peter didn't mince words; he declared flat-out that Jesus was the Messiah. Then a few verses later when he disagreed with Jesus' stated mission, he challenged it head on. Can you imagine that—trying to correct the Son of God? You might, if you have a confrontational style yourself!

When Peter was in a boat and wanted to be with Jesus, he didn't hesitate to do whatever it took to get close to Him, even if it meant swimming to shore or trying to walk on water. And remember when Jesus' enemies came to get Him in the Garden of Gethsemane? Peter became quite confrontational with a sword in his hand!

If Peter was convinced he was right, there was almost no stopping him. He was direct, he was bold, and he was to the point.

Is it any wonder God chose Peter as His spokesman on the day of Pentecost? God wanted the people to know in no uncertain terms that they'd crucified the Messiah, and that they needed to call on Him for His mercy and forgiveness. Peter's personality was custom-designed to fill the bill. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, he stood and confronted the people with the facts. And 3,000 people trusted Christ and were baptized that day.

Do you realize that there are people in your world who won't come to Christ until someone like Peter holds their feet to the fire? I was one of them.

You see, for a long time I had played church and pretended to be a Christian. I'd heard biblical teaching all my life, knew the gospel message inside and out, and could quote lots of Scripture verses. But I needed a confrontational-style evangelist who could get right in my face about my need to start living out what I knew to be true. And one day God sent one. A friend I'd known in high school challenged the discrepancy between my beliefs and my lifestyle. Before we parted he looked me in the eye and told me I was a hypocrite!

That made me angry. But over the next few days that anger turned to reflection and later to repentance. The following week I committed my life to Christ.

Some people are just waiting—as I was—for a confrontational Christian who'll present the truth of Christ and challenge them to do something about it. Could that Christian be you?

Paul's Intellectual Approach

Though Paul certainly could confront when necessary, the hallmark of his approach was a logical presentation of the gospel message. Read any of his letters—Romans being the best example—and you'll see that he was a master at clearly explaining the central truths of the faith.

This intellectual approach fit highly educated Paul, with his penchant for debating any and all foes who might challenge his positions.

Can you think of a better person for God to send to the philosophers in Athens? In Acts 17, Paul presented a powerful argument for the truth, starting with the Athenian idol to an unknown god and moving all the way to the only true God and His resurrected Messiah. Paul's approach was effective, and some of his listeners became believers.

These thinker types in Athens would not have related well to Peter's direct, "turn-or-burn" approach. They needed logic that conclusively proved the point.

Are there people in your circle who are like that? They don't want easy answers or platitudes such as, "You'll just have to accept it on faith." They need to see the solid facts that back up that faith.

Is the intellectual approach one that fits you? Are you an inquisitive type who enjoys working with ideas and evidence? This is an important style, especially in these days of increasing secularization. So many people need to hear the gospel not only declared, but also defined and defended.

This, by the way, is the style I discovered to be mine several years ago. A few months after I had written off evangelism, I heard a message by Bill Hybels called "The Style of an Evangelist." God used it to help me see that I, like Paul, was cut out for the intellectual approach. This helped me understand my interest in philosophy and apologetics. It unlocked the door that was keeping me from active evangelism.

The Blind Man's Testimonial Approach

Though we know less about him than about Peter or Paul, we can be sure of this: The blind man healed by Jesus (John 9) had seen something worth talking about!

Blind since birth, he regularly begged from people passing by. His routine quickly changed when Jesus came along and gave him the gift of sight. Before he knew it, he found himself in front of a hostile audience being asked to explain what had happened.

Notice the diversity of evangelistic styles. When Peter stood in front of a similar audience, he confronted them with the truth and told them he would obey God over people. Paul reasoned from the Scriptures with his listeners to show them that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah. But the formerly blind man took neither of these approaches.

Instead, he spoke from his experience and confidently declared: "One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!" That's hard to argue with, isn't it?

Notice that in verse 3 Jesus said this man had been born blind "so that the work of God might be displayed in his life." That's an example of what I've been saying—we are custom-tailored for a particular approach. God had been preparing this man all of his life to use his story to point people toward Christ.

There are many people around you who need to hear a similar story about how God is working in a believer's life. They might not respond very well to a challenge or an argument, but a personal account of someone's coming to faith would influence them powerfully. Could that story be yours?

Effective testimonies don't have to be dramatic. Don't exclude yourself from this approach because you have an ordinary story—ordinary stories relate well to the ordinary people in your neighborhood and workplace.

Matthew's Interpersonal Approach

Tax collectors were just not known for becoming evangelists. Yet that's exactly what happened to Matthew. After accepting Jesus' call to become one of His followers, Matthew decided to do whatever he could to bring along as many of his friends as possible.

In Lk. 5:29 we find him putting on a big banquet for his tax-collecting buddies in an effort to expose them to Jesus and the new life He offered. He relied on the relationships he'd built with

these men and sought to further shore up their friendships. He invited them into his home. He spent time with them and ate with them. He genuinely cared about them and wanted to employ the trust and respect he'd earned over the years to influence them to consider the claims of Christ.

The vantage point of friendship gives us the highest possibility of influence in the lives of others. Those who have the interpersonal style of evangelism specialize in this area. They tend to be warm, others-centered individuals who enjoy deep levels of communication and trust with those they're reaching out to.

Do you enjoy having people into your home, sharing a meal, and spending time in conversation? Many people will never be reached until someone takes the time to build that kind of closeness with them.

The Samaritan Woman's Invitational Approach

It didn't take long for the Samaritan woman to realize that the man she was talking to was no ordinary teacher. His prophetic insights and authoritative answers convinced her of His claim to be the Messiah.

So what did she do? She immediately went to her town and brought her friends to the well to hear Jesus for themselves. This simple invitation resulted in His staying in their town for two days. Many of these men and women became His followers.

There are people who would make great strides in their spiritual journey if someone would strategically invite them to a seeker-sensitive church service or outreach event. And a lot of nonChristians are open to this approach. A recent poll by researcher George Barna showed, for example, that about 25 percent of the adults in the United States would go to church if a friend would invite them. Think about it—one in four of your friends would be willing to join you!

Some people, like the woman at the well, have a knack for getting people to go places with them. Might you be one of them? Have you found that when there's an outreach event going on your minivan is crowded? Maybe it's time to trade it in on a maxivan so you can maximize your evangelistic efforts!

Dorcas's Service Approach

The Bible says in Acts 9:36 that Dorcas was "always doing good and helping the poor." She was well known for her loving acts of service performed in the name of Christ. Specifically, she made robes and articles of clothing for widows and other unfortunate people in her town.

She was, in effect, a quiet practitioner of the service approach to evangelism. It would have been very hard for people to observe her activity and not get a glimpse of the love of Christ that inspired her. In fact, her work was so important that when she died a premature death, God sent Peter to raise her from the dead and put her back into service!

People who take this approach are motivated to humbly serve others. They notice needs others overlook, and they find joy in meeting those needs, even if they don't get credit for it. Often more quiet types, these people enjoy expressing compassion through tangible forms of assistance.

Though this style often takes longer to produce spiritual results, it's one of the most important of all the evangelistic approaches. That's because service-style evangelists touch people nobody else can reach.

A woman at my church named Ginger had a brother with whom she was trying to share Christ. But he was into New Age ideas and was uninterested in Christianity. She did what came naturally to her personality—she confronted him with the claims of Christ. But she wasn't getting through. All hope seemed lost when he moved to another state in order to join a New Age religious sect.

But God had another plan. When Ginger's brother moved into his new home, he soon met the people who lived next door. They turned out to be wonderful neighbors—constantly doing things for him, like helping him get settled in, lending a hand when something needed to be fixed, bringing over food when someone in his family was sick. Just ordinary acts of service—done out of their love for Christ.

These neighbors' actions and words brought down the wall between this man and God, brick by brick by brick. After a year's time, he committed his life to Christ, moved his family back home, and celebrated his first communion sitting next to Ginger at one of our worship services!

Can you see why this style needs to be celebrated? Those neighbors will probably never be famous, but God is using their efforts to populate heaven with people the rest of us would probably never reach.

You might feel you're not a very contagious Christian. All you know how to do, after all, is make soup or fix cars. But God can use those things—and so many others like them—to draw people to Himself.

Being Yourself

Nobody perfectly fits into just one of these styles. Every believer probably has a mix of several of them. And you might come up with style number seven or eight. These approaches are presented not to limit you, but to encourage you with the value of diversity on God's team. You can be yourself.

So work within your style. Experiment with different approaches. Let God lead you to express your faith naturally to those around you. Team up with other Christians whose styles will complement yours. Take some risks in your relationships and let God work through you. In the process, you'll enjoy the thrilling adventure of personal evangelism, and you'll make an eternal difference in the lives of people you love.

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