

KNOWING & DOING

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Tensions in Evangelism

by Randy Newman, Ph.D.

Senior Teaching Fellow for Apologetics and Evangelism, C.S. Lewis Institute

Is evangelism easy? Is it simple? Can it be comfortable? I've never been able to answer any of those questions in the affirmative. And I've tried. For many years, I listened to and read books by evangelists who have tried to encourage me to “just” share my faith as if it was like breathing or striking up a casual conversation. That never worked.

At one point I thought, “Maybe evangelism is difficult” and tried that concept on for size. It fit. I found encouragement from the apostle Paul’s saying his evangelistic efforts in Corinth were “in weakness and fear, and with much trembling” (1 Cor. 2:3)¹. Now that’s my kind of evangelist!

As I’ve observed my own and others’ experiences of proclaiming the Good News, I’ve seen at least four tensions. I believe Paul referred to these very tensions toward the end of the Epistle to the Colossians. Consider his admonitions and see if these might shed light on your own efforts to reach out with the gospel.

Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful. And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains. Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should. 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. Col. 4:2

Tension Number 1: The Inseparability of Prayer and Proclamation

Did you note how seamlessly Paul flowed from the topic of prayer to the task of outreach? It’s easy to see why, given the fact that evangelism involves a human agent and a divine power. For some reason, God has chosen to have His gospel spread by people—vessels with less than perfect motives, methods, or track records. But He also comes alongside and softens hard hearts, opens blind eyes, and attracts wandering souls. Whenever one person tells another person about Jesus, at least two miracles must occur. In the unsaved person’s life, God must raise someone who is “dead in trespasses and sins” (Eph. 2:1). In the Christian’s life, He must provide the words, love, and wisdom needed because apart from Jesus, we can do nothing (see John 15:5).

Thus Paul urges us to “devote” ourselves to prayer in connection with his discussion of proclaiming the mystery of Christ. As many people have put it memorably, we need to talk to God about people and then talk to people about God. We should regularly lift up in prayer the “outsiders” that God has placed in our lives—in our families, at work, in our neighborhood, and wherever else His sovereign hand has led us. It is no accident that the other Soccer Mom on the sideline next to you or the guy sitting at the desk across from you or the family that moved into the house next to yours are all in your life. Pray for them and “watch” God pave the paths for you to strike up conversations, develop friendships, or offer help in times of need.

The fact that Paul tells us to “devote” ourselves to prayer might suggest that it’s easy to quit. If there’s one thing I’ve learned about prayer, it is that it takes devotion. It also helps to use some aids or helps for the task—a bookmark in your Bible with a list of names of nonbelievers you’re praying for or a set time in your day when you lift up the names of people who don’t know the Lord or a reminder on your phone that pops up their names on a regular basis. To be devoted to prayer for non-Christians’ salvation may seem more like a wrestling match than a comfortable ride, but it’s worth the effort.

Tension Number 2: The Complementarity of Words and Actions

There’s plenty in this passage about the verbal nature of evangelism. Paul uses the term *proclaim* twice and speaks about “our message,” “your conversation,” and the need to “proclaim it clearly.” He also speaks about “the way we act toward outsiders.” There may be a tension between words and actions, but it’s foolish to debate which one is more important. Just as we would want both wings on an airplane to function well, we should value both the verbal and nonverbal aspects of our witness.

Some people like to quote the slogan “preach the gospel at all times; when necessary, use words” and often attribute it to Francis of Assisi. But Francis probably never said such a thing. He did urge his followers to make sure their words were backed up by actions and we would certainly agree. But Francis was a bold (and, based on at least one historical account, a rather loud) evangelist who always used words. It is doubtful if he ever would have suggested that, under some circumstances, it was not necessary to use words.

Regardless of who said that pithy slogan, we should reject it. The nature of the gospel message requires words. If you bring a plate of chocolate cookies over to your new neighbors, they will not connect that act of kindness to the deadliness of sin, the necessity of the cross, the atoning work of the crucifixion, and the validating nature of the resurrection. Somewhere along the line, your neighbors will need to hear words.

So, to live with this second tension in evangelism, we need creativity to display deeds of friendship, compassion, and care as well as preparation with what to say, how to say it, and training in answering common questions that are likely to come up after the cookies are gone.

Tension Number 3: The Dynamics of Grace and Salt

I’ve heard some gospel proclaimers who sound angry. In fact, in our polarized society today, it seems that a lot of people are angry; some Christians have joined in to the noisy mess. How ironic that the word *gospel* means “good news,” when it sometimes sounds like condemnation. On the other hand, I’ve heard some so-called gospel presentations that sound like *all* good news without any hint of the severity of sin. But the message of salvation found in the Scriptures contains both bad news and good news. There’s a problem (sin), and there’s a solution (the



cross). Without a clear understanding of the problem (we've rebelled against our Creator and told Him to leave us alone), the solution seems unnecessary or absurd.

The challenge of evangelism in our day is to assert both the good and the bad, the need and the solution, the problem and the provision without minimizing any aspect of our message. It takes a great deal of thought and effort to make sure the message is clear.

If our words are "full of grace," they'll sound appealing. People will want to hear more. Some of us have been trained to offer reasons why we believe the gospel is true. That is vital. But we also need to prepare ourselves to articulate why we think it's good. We should not back away from stating that our faith is based on truth. We should also add why we're glad it is. We believe the gospel because Jesus really did rise from the dead, and we can offer arguments that validate our convictions. We also believe the gospel, because it transforms us and makes us better friends, more sacrificial spouses, gentler parents, kinder neighbors, and more joyous people all around.

Our words should also be "seasoned with salt." This description may be more difficult to grasp. But words that have salt make people thirsty. They intrigue, raise curiosity, surprise, or sting just enough to convict. Perhaps an example might help.

I've often been asked why there are so many hypocrites in the church. I've wrestled with just how to respond, given that people can ask this question with a wide range of motives. But if they're sincere, and they're really puzzled by the gap between what Christians say about how they should act and how they actually do behave, I try to mix grace and salt in my answer. It can sound something like this. "You're right. There are a lot of hypocrites in the church—probably for the same reason that there are a lot of hypocrites everywhere else. I think, to some extent, we're all hypocrites. I know I am." (So far, I'm hoping that's "grace." Now comes the salt.) "But my problems are far worse than hypocrisy. They're anger and bitterness and pride and arrogance and . . . well, I'd rather not keep going." (Then I hope to add more grace). "And that's why I'm part of the church. Because we're all a bunch of hypocrites who have found forgiveness and cleansing for our hypocrisy and things that are far worse."

Tension Number 4: The Realities of Reception and Rejection

There is one more tension that, if we can remember it, will help us in our uncomfortable evangelism. Some people will respond well to our words. Others won't. In the first chapter of Colossians, Paul recounted how the recipients of his letter heard the gospel and "understood God's grace in all its truth" (Col. 1:6). But in chapter 4, he says he's "in chains" (Col. 4:3) for his preaching. That should not surprise us. Everywhere Paul went, some believed and some tried to kill him. Jesus always received similar "mixed reviews." Since those who proclaim the gospel are to one group "the fragrance of life" and to another "the smell of death" (see 2 Cor. 2:16), we must anticipate both responses. This will protect us against discouragement while stopping us from taking credit.

It would be nice if evangelism was easy, simple, and comfortable, but that's simply not the case. It is, however, miraculous, powerful, and amazing. While full of tension, it also brims with wonder. If we relinquish our desire (demand?) for ease, we can trust God to use us in the most eternally significant enterprise imaginable. That's well worth any amount of tension. ❖

The glory of God, and, as our only means to glorifying him, the salvation of
the human soul, is the real business of life.

C.S. Lewis

Notes:

1. All Scripture quotations are from the New International Version 1984.



Randy Newman is Senior Fellow for Evangelism and Apologetics at C.S. Lewis Institute. He is also an adjunct faculty member for Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and Patrick Henry College. He received his M.Div. and Ph.D. from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. After serving for over 30 years with Campus Crusade for Christ, he established Connection Points, a ministry to help Christians engage people's hearts the way Jesus did. He has written three books and numerous articles about evangelism and other ways our lives intertwine with God's creation. He and his wife Pam live in Annandale, VA and have three grown sons. Randy blogs at www.connectionpoints.us.

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