



Evangelical, But Not Evangelistic

by Stuart McAllister

Apologist

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A number of years ago in Europe, I was talking with a British friend of mine about all the changes we were witnessing in the various cultures we had visited. Change was the order of the day as old views, beliefs, and values were discarded and new ones ushered in with unfettered enthusiasm. As with many seasons in life, we saw opposing schools. Some embraced all change as essentially good, to be welcomed without hesitation. Others saw change as a threat and were anxious about what was being lost and the implications of those losses.

My friend coined the phrase “cultural vaporization,” which drew on the analogy of boiling water. Water, while remaining water, disappears into the air at a designated temperature. The phrase “cultural vaporization” actually reflects a statement used by Karl Marx when he spoke of a set of conditions “where all that is solid melts into air.” It is a descriptive phrase, and when applied to various contexts, provides helpful insight.

One area where I have noticed a definite shift, or “vaporization,” is in evangelism. Here I am not talking about the programmatic emphasis of special days, so-called “missions,” or guest speakers at church. I mean the heartfelt, Spirit-led, and biblically shaped personal desire to share with others, as often as possible, the good news of the gospel.

Writing to Timothy, the Apostle Paul reminded him, “For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love, and of self discipline” (1 Tim. 1:7, NIV). He followed with the clear exhortation: “So do not be ashamed to testify about our Lord” (1 Tim. 1:8). When I first became a Christian in Scotland over 30 years ago, the climate was one of biblical faithfulness, a serious life and lifestyle, and a strong commitment to

the proclamation and advance of the gospel. I was encouraged to give my “testimony” to others. We gave out tracts, visited homes, and shared scripture when we could. Were there mistakes? Of course. Was some of it culturally insensitive and at times possibly a bit rude? Yes. But it was not all bad, nor was it all flawed or ineffective.



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Let me back up a bit now to where I began, that is, with the notion of change or cultural vaporization. The experience of modernity and the growth of technological, political, economic, and social developments have all had a massive impact upon society and culture. We have experienced what Philip Rieff calls “the triumph of the therapeutic.” Other social commentators such as David Brooks speak about living “On Paradise Drive” and how consumerism frames and defines so much of what we do or want. It is an age where looking good and feeling good are the major goals in life, and where being good and doing good are notions that carry less weight, concern, or power.

What does this have to do with evangelism? Clearly, for many, the very idea of publicly sharing their faith with a stranger or of getting into a reasoned disagreement about God, Christ, the Bible, or truth is one of the worst things they could contemplate. Despite the fact that they are daily the target of constant communication trying to sell some product or another, or of someone’s views and values being trumpeted as the latest solution for our problems, many Christians opt for silence, for the “stealth” approach. Perhaps, they imagine, if we just live quiet, consistent, good lives,

our example will do all that is needed and onlookers can “choose” if they want to. However, Paul would say otherwise: “Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ” (Rom. 10:17).

The issue I want to highlight is how our current cultural realities undermine many of our core convictions, dampen our biblical enthusiasm, and lead us to redefine our behavior and commitments. What do I mean? We may still pay lip service to certain beliefs or to particular values (Bible study, prayer, evangelism, etc.), but in practice we often give them little or no thought. We relax in the knowledge that these things are covered by the professionals whose job it is to do them. We still believe in them, we just don’t feel any urgency or need to personally engage in them.

At this point, I’d like to add another dimension, what I’d like to call the parable of the nice Muslim. I recently took a taxi from Oxford to Heathrow airport. The driver was a Muslim gentleman from Pakistan. I had barely entered the taxi when he enquired as to whether I believed in God. He then launched into a polite but lengthy effort to persuade me of my need to embrace Islam and the one true path.

He was not aggressive, nor was he rude, but he was sincere and determined. I asked questions in order to see how much he understood of the Christian faith he so clearly rejected. I challenged some of his statements. I saw quickly that the only “authority” he knew or acknowledged was the Qur’an. Despite this we had an amiable exchange and actually agreed on several points. His observations about the state of British culture, the problems with immorality, and the sad state of many youngsters were all quite relevant. However, our disagreements were profound, and as Os Guinness would say, “The differences made a difference.”

He did not acknowledge the Bible, did not believe Jesus was the son of God, and did not believe any other wisdom or insight was needed other than that found in the Qur’an and the teachings of Islam. Our disagreements did not end the interaction, they merely sharpened it. In fact, as I stepped out of the taxi at the airport, he held my hand and wished me a good life and many blessings.

I could not help but reflect on this encounter. First of all, in today’s politically correct and somewhat paranoid era, it is hard to imagine many Christians being willing to face this kind of scenario. Either we would freeze up at the first exchange, or make some polite comment which could dismiss the whole thing. Secondly, for many of us the very idea that we might

initiate such a dialogue is enough to send our heart palpitations into overdrive. I wondered:

- Would I have had the courage or conviction to launch into a serious witnessing attempt with a complete stranger?
- What kind of boldness, courage, or conviction is needed to prompt this direct approach?
- Were the possible risks (offense or other) unknown or were they of little weight?

I thought of the many discussions I have had on what it means to “do church” in this era, and quite frankly they seemed trivial and irrelevant in light of the larger issues at stake in our time. The huge fascination with relevance and authenticity (both valid issues) at times eclipses bigger losses and challenges that we seem less concerned about. It seems to me that a sincere effort to adapt to modern conditions and to seek ever-newer ways to be “relevant” has come with a hidden price tag. Historic beliefs and practices have come up for review, assessment, and evaluation. Many have been found “wanting,” or in today’s terms, “embarrassing,” and so have been jettisoned or simply put in storage with the quiet hope that they may be conveniently forgotten or just disappear.

Now I know some will object that evangelism is taking place and that many individuals and churches do share their faith, and this is no doubt true. What I am referring to is a broader trend that shows a growing disaffection with the word evangelism and a definite loss of passion in terms of actual practice. Let me illustrate. As an apologist, we often help Christians respond to difficult questions posed to them or their faith. The idea of apologetics (1 Peter 3:15) is to offer “a reason for the hope that we have.”

Many times in Q & A sessions, we encounter all kinds of abstract, theoretical, and hazy questions. The questioner posits some dilemma that they feel is an obstacle to faith, yet when they are pressed, I often find that the dilemma described is not a question emerging from real conversations with unbelievers, but is rather speculation exchanged by Christians with one another about their beliefs. As Michael Ramsden in our UK office has often pointed out, in the absence of any real and practical sharing of the faith, there is no need for, and no relevance of, apologetics. It is in the context of sharing our faith that the role and value of apologetics becomes clear.

When we study the lives of men like C.S. Lewis and Francis Schaeffer, we realize that they invested serious amounts of time and effort in clarifying their beliefs and articulating their message. So much of their work is rooted in certain beliefs and

values: the belief that Christ is unique and is the only Savior (John 14:6; Acts 4:12); the belief in the lostness of men and women and the gospel as a message of salvation (Romans 10:14-15); the belief in evangelism and the great commission to actually go forth and share the good news (Matthew 28:18-20).

If we were to do a broad historical review of famous evangelicals, we would discover a litany of names and personalities committed to the task of evangelism. I think of John Bunyan and his famous *Pilgrims Progress*. I think of Jonathan Edwards and his passion for his New England compatriots. I think of Charles Spurgeon and his faithful preaching and witness in a rapidly changing London. In the twentieth century names like Billy Graham, John Stott, Bill Bright, George Verwer, and a host of others spring to mind.

In today's postmodern, diverse, and challenging arena, we face several crises:

- An *identity* crisis: we want to distance ourselves from all that is offensive, irrelevant, and ugly from our evangelical past, so much so that many want to abandon the name "evangelical."
- A crisis of *calling*: we are unsure why we are here, what we should do, and whether the gospel is just one more thing among many (perhaps an irrelevance).
- A crisis of *passion*: it is okay to be passionate about political positions, sports personalities, the cars we prefer, or the food we desire, but our faith?
- A crisis of *vision*: we are not primarily animated by God's purpose for the salvation of the lost.

Now the issue is this: If indeed some information has come to light that overthrows the gospel, if perhaps Richard Dawkins' book, *The God Delusion*, is indeed the definitive word against Christianity, or if the latest anti-Christian polemic has revealed some fatal blow to the historic faith, then we should admit defeat, get rid of our Christian paraphernalia, and close up shop. However, I do not think this is the case.

When I was a young Christian, I often heard people invoking the phrase used in Revelation 2:1-7 regarding those who had "lost their first love." As the years went by, I met some who could be described this way. They had only memories and nostalgia for the early days when faith was strong, vision was clear, and passion

was real. However, in the passage the actual words say, "You have forsaken your first love" (Rev. 1:4, NIV). There is a vast difference between losing something (involuntary) and forsaking it (a deliberate act).

I wonder if the passage of time, the lack of attention to discipline and practice, and the steady erosion from other "loves" takes its toll in such a way that we find ourselves in a place that has little or no resemblance to the faith of our fathers and the biblical witness we are called to. My encounter with the Muslim gentleman was a reminder and a challenge.

- What is it I really value and am living for?
- Am I ready, willing, and able to share my faith as opportunity provides?
- Does passion for the gospel animate my soul?

As I look back, look around, and look ahead, I realize that nothing has changed in the message, but much has changed in the context and in me. My prayer to God is for a fresh stirring of the Holy Spirit to rekindle the passion and recalibrate my life and my commitments. I wish the same for you.

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