

Evangelism in a Changed World

I want to first look at the church's current struggles in the area of evangelism, and then describe how *The Person of Jesus* study works and why it is timely for today's culture.

Evangelism Is Not What It Used to Be

A Campus Crusade worker reported that in the 70s, for every ten gospel presentations they would see one conversion; now it is twenty-five presentations for one conversion. Research by George Barna, George Gallup, and James Hunter confirm this anecdotal statistic. The average evangelical church introduces 1.7 people a year to Christ per 100 people who attend. According to Barna, we are only replacing the dead.²

This relatively bleak state is hidden by signs that many churches and denominations are growing. But even those numbers can be misleading because growing churches are often just re-arranging Christians. For instance, 57% of the congregations of one of the most rapidly growing evangelical denominations in America had, in 1995, no adult professions of faith—that comes to 650 churches out of 1133. You might think that was just the smaller, ingrown churches, but sixty-nine of its churches have membership of over 500, and 13 of those churches had no professions of faith.³

What is going on? The answer is that the world is changing. A whole generation has grown up without Sunday school and is ignorant of even the most basic claims of Christianity. The church is as foreign to them as the inside of a bar is to the typical evangelical—and as scary. William Leith, writing in the *Independent on Sunday* (A British newspaper), describes what it feels like for a non-Christian (which he is) to visit a church to witness an infant baptism:

Will anybody spot me? It's like when you are in a strip club: you think with relief, well, if they do spot me, they're in here too. Organized religion has sunk pretty low these days, at least among people I know; the feeling is that it's just third-raters who get involved, oily little tinpot careerists or neurotics, people afraid of the modern world. . . This is my local church, these mild-looking people must be my neighbors, but I have never seen any of them before; religious people and pagans live in completely different worlds these days. A ritual is being organized, quite a frightening one, with people standing in formation around the central focal point, the...altar, and my God! Someone's carrying a baby towards them! My tabloid-conditioned satanic abuse needle gives a jolt. . . At the end, I am bolting for the door, pushing a bit, unable to help myself... Outside the church, the noisy, irreligious world looks great.⁴

The result is that methods of sharing the gospel that worked in a more Christianized world might not work as well in our day. For example, the Dr. Kennedy (Evangelism Explosion) question ("If you were to appear before God in heaven, and God were to ask you, 'Why should I let you into heaven?' What would you answer God?") is a simple way to find out where people are in their understanding of the gospel. But for someone such as our reporter, who has little background in Christianity, it might not make a lot of sense. It works well where there are shared assumptions about God, heaven, and right and wrong, but that society is dying.

Increasingly, people no longer think in "church" categories. D.A. Carson of Trinity Seminary in Chicago compared Bill Hybel's well-known survey of Willow Creek, Illinois some twenty years ago with a more recent survey done by David Fisher, senior minister of Park Street Church in Boston. They arranged for a similar survey among their 50,000 closest neighbors. Many of those interviewed, when asked why they did not attend church, thought it surprising that anyone should think that they should! Music was not listed as a major factor in drawing people—why should they attend church to hear contemporary music when they had their own CDs?⁵

It is not surprising, then, that the Bible is a mere icon in most homes. Dave Barna, the pollster, shares these statistics: 80% of Americans have a Bible in their home but it just sits on the shelf: 80% of Americans believe that the Bible contains the statement "God helps those who help themselves." Furthermore, 65% of us do not know what "John 3:16" refers to, although signs are often displayed at sporting events. Only 50% of adults know that the Book of Jonah is in the Bible, while 10% believe that Joan of Arc was the wife of Noah.⁶

What has happened to our world?

Many thinkers call our world at the beginning of the 21st century "postmodern." Modernism was the confident world that our parents grew up in that believed in the idea of progress, the goodness of people, the power of education, the wisdom of science, and the blessings of technology. Modernism replaced the absolutes of Christianity with the absolutes of the power of the individual to master his or her world. But it did not work. Auschwitz, racism, pollution, and the breakdown of the home are just a few of the things that pulled the rug out from under modernism. This cultural shift is summarized in the chart on the next page:⁷

| MODERNISM | POST-MODERNISM |
|--|--|
| Me Institutions Propositional Truth Excellence Growth Lonely Success | We Relationships Relational Truth Authenticity Community Alone Wholeness |

So we are in the midst of a rebellion against modernism. People no longer believe in progress—they think more in terms of relationships and “how am I feeling today”. People no longer believe in absolute truth—truth is what is true for you and your particular group. People no longer believe in mega-answers that define reality—there is only your particular story. Thus, God becomes just a matter of personal preference—true for you but not for me.

This would seem to mean tough times for Christianity because we believe in an overarching story that is “true for everyone”. Jesus is not an option. Consequently, a number of theologians are apprehensive about this shift from modernism to postmodernism. Bill Edgar of Westminster Seminary says that, “a postmodern atmosphere is one in which words often lose their authority and are replaced by images or feelings. Doing apologetics in these circumstances is particularly difficult. Few people are asking the ‘big questions’ today. Instead they settle for a grab bag of ideas and quasi-religious notions to be used at convenience.... I am not...optimistic....”⁸ Likewise, John Eui-whan Kim, President of Chongshin Seminary writes, “Regarding the finality of Jesus Christ, postmodernism with its pluralistic tendency (anyone believes what they want) reduces Christ to merely one of several religious founders. Jesus Christ can no longer be considered, the Truth (John 14:6) for all humankind.”⁹

You have probably experienced this attitude to Jesus in conversations with non-Christians. Recently a Michigan pastor announced to his congregation that Jesus is not the only way to salvation. His fellow pastors immediately denounced him, but most of his parishioners stood up for him.¹⁰

Opportunities for the Gospel

I agree with the caution of Edgar and Kim. The conceptual framework of postmodernism is mostly antithetical to Christianity. The move from modernism to postmodernism is just going from the frying pan into the fire.

But if you look at what it feels like to live in this new world, there is considerable reason for hope. Why is that? For one thing, the lack of any coherent direction—matched by the denial that any direction is even possible—makes “it feel as if our whole culture has the willies.”¹¹ That makes people more open. Not only is there a pervading anxiety and fear that lingers over our world, but the ideas of postmodernity are also wreaking havoc in relationships. The son-in-law of a friend of mine recently walked out on his wife and three children—one a newborn—for another relationship because he no longer felt “fulfilled”. He wasn’t being true to himself to stay committed to his wife and children.

This lawlessness of everyone “doing what is right in his own eyes” became so apparent that, beginning in the early 90s, you noticed a clear shift in casual, on-the-street conversations. Along with sports and the weather, you could talk about what was wrong with our world.

Postmodernism opens up a door for the gospel. In the world of modernity, Christianity did not even have a voice because we believed in “non-scientific” myths. Now our “myth” is accepted right along with everyone else’s myth. That is good news because the gospel does very well on a level playing field. Tim Keller notes that “unlike the older secularists, [people now] are not closed to the idea of the supernatural or of religious experience.”¹² Stan Grenz, Professor of Theology at Regent College, illustrates how postmodernism has let God back into the picture by noting the presence of the god-like character “Q” on the TV show *Star Generation*. Of course, “Q” is not the God of Christians, but at least spirituality is back in the picture.¹³

The havoc in society and relationships has wounded many of the players, leaving non-Christians and Christians alike often struggling just to get through the day. People who are weak are more open to hearing the gospel—when you are suffering you will try anything. Furthermore, the modern plagues of abortion, adultery, and abandoned families affect Christian homes as much as non-Christian ones, thus making us often as weak as the person we want to help. But that makes our message so much more authentic—the very thing that people are searching for in postmodernism. Paul, the Apostle’s own struggle with weakness put him in the place where he learned that “God’s strength is made perfect in weakness” (II Corinthians 12:9). In short, we can relate better when we ourselves have suffered.

To summarize: the playing field is leveled, we are no longer in the stands; the players are all wounded, including us; and the supernatural is back. Now, let’s look at a specific strategy

A New Method for a Changed World

After discovering what Jesus was like as a person, I wondered if studying the person of Jesus might be a door to reaching non-Christians with the gospel, because the typical non-Christian might not like religion, the Bible, the church, or Christians, but tended to put Jesus in a special category—almost like a religious Santa Claus. So I decided to try it. My problem was that, because I lived and worked in a Christian ghetto, I did not know many non-Christians; so I asked around in my church if anyone would be willing to invite a group of their friends to a study. A house painter with a small business agreed to ask some of his employees—five said yes. Five years later two of the participants of the study became believers, an atheist and his wife, and the others have grown in their faith. Many others have led Person of Jesus studies with encouraging results in all kinds of diverse settings.

Why did they come and why did they stay?

I am convinced that the person of Jesus is one of the best ways to share the gospel in the world that confronts us. James Sire, a senior editor with InterVarsity Press, writes this in an essay on how to reach the postmodern world:

I believe that the best reason for believing that Christianity is true is Jesus, and the best reason for Jesus is Jesus himself. The Gospels—the narrative of Jesus' life, teaching, crucifixion and resurrection—are the best proof for the truth of the Christian faith. Most people who are not Christians do not have enough knowledge of Jesus to reject him or to declare that Christianity is false or not worth believing. If people will just look, just read and ponder Mark's or Luke's or Matthew's or John's account of Jesus, they will be struck by what they find. They will be brought into a direct encounter with Jesus, and they will be forced to make an existential decision about who Jesus was and is.... There is something inherently attractive about the story of Jesus.¹⁴

Again and again, you can see this fascination with the person of Jesus. In the eighties, Time magazine had a cover story on Jesus that they ran during a slow news week. It outsold every other issue of that year. I have noticed this same interest in Jesus in conversations I have with non-Christians. Recently, on a plane trip, I started chatting with my seatmate, a chemical engineer from Canada. I told her I did not have any money for focus groups, so would she answer me honestly about something I was working on? She was game, so I asked her if she would be interested in studying the person of Jesus as a way of understanding what love is. She said, "Yes, the person of Jesus is intriguing to most people." Later I found out that she had no particular religious faith and her husband, a refugee from Eastern Europe, was an atheist. I asked her, "Why would you want to study about Jesus?" She said, "I make a distinction between faith and religion, and Jesus is outside of organized religion."

Studying Jesus is one of the main reasons why people came to the studies, and just the sheer beauty of who he is as a person is why they stay. Einstein, without professing Christianity, articulates the attractiveness of Jesus as found in the gospels,

Q. To what extent are you influenced by Christianity?

A. As a child I received instruction both in the Bible and in the Talmud. I am a Jew, but I am enthralled by the luminous figure of the Nazarene.

Q. You accept the historical existence of Jesus?

A. Unquestionably. No man can read the gospels without feeling the actual presence of Jesus. His personality pulsates in every word. No myth is filled with such life.¹⁵

Each study begins with the leader reading this quote from Einstein and saying, "I want you to begin to see Jesus as Einstein did."

The method of our study is not to convince someone by rational argument—although that might play a part—but to show them a person and let that person convince them, to tell them a story and let them be drawn into that story. Alistair McGrath, professor of Theology at Regent College and Oxford, notes, "Commercial advertising discovered many years ago that it was not closely reasoned and justified arguments that sold products—it was superbly crafted images, making a direct and powerful appeal to the human imagination.... We need to meditate on those remarkable words of some Greeks who came to Philip: 'Sir, we wish to see Jesus.' (John 12:21). Here is our task: to help people see Jesus Christ with their own eyes."¹⁶

A Relational Approach to Evangelism

It takes pressure off the study leader to simply have his or her task be presenting Jesus as a person. Carl George, a leading proponent of the cell group church, says, "When I was a child I heard a traveling evangelist say something I have never forgotten: If you can get a person to Jesus, that person will be all right."¹⁷

This relational approach affects the way people are introduced to the study. When inviting someone I do not say to them, "Do you want to have a personal relationship with Jesus?" How can they relate to someone they don't know? How can they repent of sins they don't feel? Imagine that you were single and someone asked you, after a five-minute conversation, if you wanted to get married to them. You'd probably freak out no matter how attractive they were because we instinctively know that relationships take time. On the other hand, if someone asked you to dinner you might say "yes."

Trust doesn't build quickly, especially in a world where things like wedding vows don't mean much. I honestly think that we forget that a relationship with Jesus is simply that—a relationship. And just like any other relationship it needs to grow over time. Trust is the bond of relationships, and most of us instinctively know that trust usually does not develop quickly.

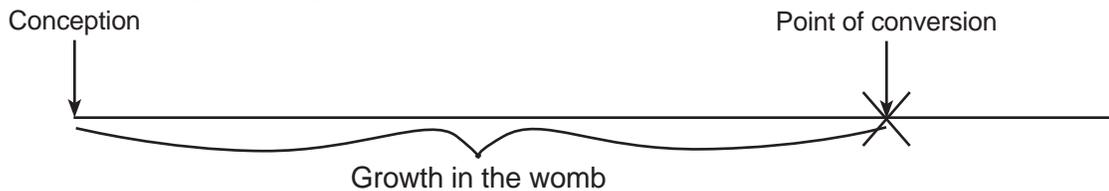
So when inviting people, ask them if they want to study the person of Jesus to see how he related to people as a way of helping them in their relationships. I don't ask them to study the Bible because I want them to study Jesus—the Bible is the means. Now, of course, Bible study is exactly what we do, but the words "Bible study" are scary for many non-Christians. After inviting them and they say yes, then ask them to bring a Bible if they have one or have Bibles at your home to give out. But it is not a Bible study; it is a Jesus study.

The best way to think of this theoretically is as a time-line of someone becoming a Christian.¹⁸ We are mostly taught to evangelize by focusing on the Point of Conversion. We think that if people will just understand the gospel, then we can move them to that Point. (See the diagram below.)

In a world heavily influenced by Christianity, as much of America once was, it makes sense to focus on the Point of Conversion. People already know the basics of Christianity and have some sense of sin, so it is just a matter of deepening that conviction of sin and explaining the gospel. Consequently, in the past many preachers thought of their preaching on Sunday morning as a principal means of evangelism in their communities. So Horatius Bonar calls the preacher to "save souls" during his Sunday morning sermon.¹⁹ That makes sense in Christendom, and it is still good advice because there is always someone in a congregation who is unsaved, but most of the souls that need to be saved in our day are not in front of the preacher; they are sleeping—literally.

A Process Approach to Evangelism

The need for process is implicit in Jesus' telling Nicodemus that "he must be born again". The crucial part of having a baby is not the actual birth, but the inception and growth in the womb. My wife and I have six children, and I testify that there wasn't a whole lot my wife could do to start or stop the process of giving birth because birth is a natural by-product of a nine-month period of slow growth. The conception and growth in the womb are more crucial than labor.



This pattern is also reflected in the Biblical metaphor of the church as the bride, and Christ as the bridegroom. The crucial part of getting married is not the actual moment when the wife receives the engagement ring or when they exchange vows—those are important, but they are natural consequences of two people falling in love. In fact, a sure way to end a courting relationship is for one person to start talking about marriage too quickly. We instinctively suspect manipulation and wonder if someone really loves me or is just desperate to get married.

So the goal of our study is for the non-Christian to simply be with Jesus. It is hard to fall in love with Jesus if you aren't around him. But if someone can be exposed to the beauty of Christ in a setting where they also see Christians reflecting the beauty of Christ in their lives, then conversion is much more likely.

What we are describing is the Biblical teaching that God's Spirit is working in the life of the believer before their conversion, "calling" them. Most of us recall the working of the Spirit in our lives before conversion.²⁰ By studying the person of Jesus we provide fuel for the Spirit to draw them to Christ.

The process of falling in love with Jesus, the process of building trust, and the process of conversion are a series of mini-decisions or small steps.²¹ This fits in with the spirit of our age—the search for authentic relationships is one of the cries of postmodernism. People are thinking in terms of relationships more than ever before. The process implicit in *The Person of Jesus* is based on a relationship grid.

A word of caution: if you focus on process only, you just might end up with all process and no conversions. The New Testament is filled with both "process stories" (the disciples' slow movement to faith in Jesus) and "immediate conversion stories" (Phillip with the Ethiopian). Someone can believe in Jesus just by reading a tract or hearing a gospel presentation without any human preparation. The Spirit often prepares people without anything that we do. Don't make this approach into a rule that applies to all relationships. I am just suggesting that, for many people, conversion is a process. *The Person of Jesus* study allows us to put energy into a process that builds trust leading to conversion.

A Love Approach to Evangelism

Our culture is becoming increasingly sensitive to relationships, but, ironically, it is also becoming increasingly lawless or insensitive in relationships. Both are hallmarks of postmodernism with its conflicting emphases on relationships and "do your own thing." This means that the standards are higher as to how you should love me, but the standards are lower as to how I should love you. It institutionalizes hypocrisy and results in a chaos of hurt in relationships. Consequently people are constantly hunting for both healing and a formula to fix their relationships. Into this gap steps the therapist, the new priest of paganism, the new pastor of our souls.²² But this quest for relationship, this quest for love, has no power in it because it is separated from the source of all love, Jesus of Nazareth. So many are open for the next cure. So why not look to Jesus? People instinctively sense that Jesus is a model for love.

Unfortunately Christians are not always seen as models of love by our media. An example of this is an article in *The Atlantic Monthly* written by a non-Christian that describes the encounter of a young widow with a group of Christians trying to convert her. In the article evangelical Christians come across as plastic, unreal, and manipulative. At times that is an accurate description of Christians.²³ So in the study, Christians can learn to love while they are loving.

The most effective part of the study is that non-Christians are not only watching someone who loves but they are being loved by the Christians in the group. Time and time again non-Christians who've come to faith in *Person of Jesus* studies report that it was the love of Christians in the study that drew them to faith.

One of the hallmarks of love and, not surprisingly, one of the hallmarks of Jesus' ministry is that he loves people just where they are. So when a sick person is brought to him he heals him. When a greedy person comes to him, he teaches him. He heals not only through miracles, but also through his teaching. His teaching met people where they were, just as his miracles did. A heart gripped by bitterness that needs to learn to forgive is in as much bondage as a body with a withered hand. In other words, Jesus' moral teaching met felt needs as much as his miracles did. The gospel writers frequently describe Jesus' teaching and healing going on at the same time. It is his two-pronged assault on sin and death that anticipates his ultimate assault through the cross (sin) and his resurrection (death).

So, titles of the lessons of *The Person of Jesus* are directed to the felt needs of people just like Jesus' ministry was: Compassion, Honesty, Facing Sadness, Joy, etc. This fits in with the focus of each of the four gospels—each Gospel is “audience-focused.” The four Gospels are written to outsiders to convince them of Jesus, so they tailor their selection of events from Jesus' life to where their audience is. Matthew is written for a Jewish reader, John is written for the Greek mind, Mark is written for the Roman, almost as a fast-paced mystery novel with the question “Who is Jesus?” repeatedly raised, and Luke is written to the cosmopolitan Greek and Jew. John comes out and says that “these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name” (20:31). But like the gospels, and particularly the gospel of John, *The Person of Jesus* moves from felt needs to real needs. A woman's need for physical water is a door to her receiving spiritual water; a man's need for sight becomes a way that he sees Jesus by faith. Felt needs are real and must be addressed if we are going to love people, but our hearts don't feel their greatest need—the need for repentance for being our own gods and the need to worship the living God.

A Personal Approach to Evangelism and Discipleship

Not only do the gospels speak to people's felt needs, but the gospels themselves are uniquely relational literature in that they describe literally hundreds of very real personal encounters that Jesus has with people. So, in *The Person of Jesus*, we study how Jesus loves people in those personal encounters and then tie that in with his teaching.

According to Dr. Clair Davis, Professor of Church History at Westminster Seminary, the church has largely ignored any serious study of the person of Jesus.²⁴ He notes that in the last thousand years the only serious studies of the person of Jesus have been Calvin's insights into Jesus' three-fold office and Warfield's essay on the emotional life of Christ.²⁵ I agree with Hans Frei, the post-liberal Yale theologian, who critiques conservatives, saying that we are so propositionally oriented that we miss the story line of the Bible.²⁶ You can be so propositionally oriented that you miss the person.

The result is that we can present Jesus so artificially that he is almost unreal. For instance, I have often asked Christians, “When you get to heaven, what person in the Bible would you like to meet?” Only one person out of several hundred has mentioned Jesus. I think the word “person” throws them off. They are not used to thinking of Jesus as a person. A friend of mine said, “When I get to heaven I look forward to sitting down with the apostle Peter who was constantly messing up. I can relate to him and all his struggles. But I am not sure what it would be like to sit down with Jesus.”

We tend to relegate the stories of Jesus to children's Sunday School and move on to the more “mature” letters of Paul, Peter, James, and John. So we move from story to philosophy, and therefore away from person. But the goal of *The Person of Jesus* is, in Luther's words, to “draw Christ as deep as possible into the flesh.”²⁷

In the first century, Jesus was first experienced as man, and then, as people came to know him, as God. Now, we're so aware of his divinity, that we can miss his manhood with the result that he is more of a plastic person than a real flesh and blood friend. For example, I was telling a friend the story from John 21 when Jesus and Peter were taking a walk by the Sea of Galilee. During the walk, Jesus tells Peter that one day Peter will suffer and die for him. Peter interrupts Jesus and asks him what is going to happen to John, who is walking several paces behind them. Jesus snaps at Peter, “What is that to you?” In other words, “Peter, stay out of his life.” Jesus gets irritated at Peter's intrusion into John's life. I told my friend that Jesus is modeling for us what good irritation is like. Her response was, “But Jesus is God, so he can do that.” So you see the problem. Jesus is so “God” that we don't have much sense of what he is like as a person. (The other half of the problem is that she'd been taught in the church that irritation is always wrong.)

A Teaching Approach to Evangelism

We usually think in terms of someone first becoming a Christian and then teaching or discipling them. But *The Person of Jesus* approach involves a strong emphasis on teaching. This has the potential, over the long haul, of making stronger Christians who are trained in the Word as they come to faith. Ernie Reisinger notes that this was the model we see in the early church and Acts.²⁸ For instance, in Acts 5:21, "...they entered into the temple early in the morning, and taught." Next, we find them standing in the temple evangelizing by "teaching the people" (Acts 5:25). In fact, the Sanhedrin accused them: "...you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching." This is mirrored in Os Guinness' observation that the Great Commission is a command to win people to a whole discipleship—to "make disciples . . . teaching them" (Matthew 28:30).²⁹

The method for the Bible study is inductive, meaning that the study leader asks questions and lets the group discover on their own how Jesus loves people. All of us remember truth better if we discover it ourselves. Coming to see the truths of the Bible on their own fits with the postmodern distrust of authority—it is difficult to come in and say "this is the Bible, so believe it." Unbelievers need to develop a trust in the Bible as the Word of God in the same way they develop trust in any relationship.

A by-product of an inductive method is getting to know one another. While discussing a text together, they are also relating—which fits the relational bent of our age. In summary, the content of the course is about the person of Jesus and how he models *love* for us in his *relationships*, and the method of the course, inductive study, is a *relational method*.

A Missions Approach to Evangelism

The shift from a Christianized world to a post-Christian world means that we are now doing missions in our own culture; our evangelism is cross-cultural in a way that it hasn't been since the Roman era. There is nothing more messy than missions—people start, then they stop, people believe, then they fall away, people love you, then they hate you—but there is also nothing more glorious than missions. Few things are more exciting than watching people open a Bible for the first time in their lives and see the beauty of our Savior, Jesus Christ, true Light of true Light, very God of very God.

In his last days, exiled on the island of Elba, Napoleon began to read the gospels and discovered who Jesus is. He said to General Bertrand, who was an atheist, "I know men; and I tell you that Jesus Christ is not a man.... Everything in him astonishes me. His spirit overawes me, and his will confounds me. Between him and whoever else in the world, there is no possible term of comparison. He is truly a Being by himself."³⁰