

A Better Way to Evangelize: Avoiding Evangelism Collateral Damage

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Most Christians take it for granted that we are supposed to tell others about Christ. Jesus' final words in the gospel of Matthew exhort us to go into all nations and baptize converts. However, often we give a lot of thought to our evangelism techniques, and focus on innovative ways to reach out, but we focus very little to the unintended consequences of our zeal. I grew up with all sorts of evangelism techniques, some that worked, some that embarrassed me beyond belief, and quite frankly, I was often more put off by many evangelism techniques than I was drawn to Christ by them.

Let me give an example: Street preachers. One prominent street preacher is brother Jed Smock. He and his friends go from college to college preaching damnation and judgment to hoards of provoked students. I have seen Brother Jed preach about 10 times while at Ohio University. My brother and I were even in a photo on his web page at one point. Not once did I encounter any converted students



among Jed's group. When I asked about the lack of students in his entourage (considering his ministry is geared toward them), he admitted that a few are converted from his techniques, but not many. In other words, he is pretty darn ineffective. However, for the handful of students who have come to know Christ from Brother Jed's preaching, how many have actually been turned off of the idea of Jesus Christ for good? Many evangelists like Brother Jed fail to take into account the number of people who actually avoid becoming a Christian because of their harsh evangelism methods.

So let's look at the effectiveness of evangelism mathematically. Let's use the equation $G - B = PC$. **G**: People leaving with a good impression of the faith because of our methods, **B**: people leaving with a bad impression of the faith because of our evangelism methods, and **PC**: potential convert balance. I am not much into applying formulas like this to spiritual matters, but if we look at it this way now, my point will become more clear. Basically when all is said and done, if G is greater than B, then your evangelism technique resulted in more potential converts than it turned off, which is good. Even if nobody converts immediately, at least you know that people have left with a positive, accurate impression of the Christian faith. Now, if B is greater than G, then you have actually turned off more from the faith than left interested, leaving many already angry or confused people even angrier and more confused. Of course, this is not scientific and you can't actually accurately measure these variables, but the formula is a good thing to keep in mind. Also bear in mind that I am talking about people leaving with impressions *as a result of our evangelism methods*, not on account of the message we preach. The message of Jesus is offensive, was offensive, and always will be offensive, at least to many people, because it is morally and theologically radical.

This equation shows one thing: collateral damage from our evangelism techniques may turn more away than we bring in, resulting in people focusing not on the actual message, but on our ineffective methods. Confrontational and provocative evangelism almost always results in high collateral damage. Getting people angry and affirming the stereotypes people have of Christians almost never works. Take Pat Robertson as an example. "Assassinate Hugo Chavez," he said. "Ariel Sharon had a stroke because God caused it," he said. While I am sure Robertson has led many people to Christ, how many have been turned off by his ridiculous (from the Catholic/historical faith standpoint) statements? Another example that bears repeating is "street preaching." I have heard a street preacher justify his harshness by saying, "if someone was in a burning home they would want you to yell loudly at them so they know the importance of getting out!" This works well in emergencies, but in common conversation, such screaming and carrying on is just seen as some jerk who is full of himself yelling at everyone. While it should not be our goal to water down the gospel so people leave "feeling good," there are tactful and charitable ways to speak the truth.

Another example I can think of is a provocative Catholic room I encountered on paltalk, a voice and text chat forum. The title of the room was meant to generate discussion. However, it implied that only Catholics are saved, something Catholics do not actually believe. Many people came into that room provoked and ready for a fight. Folks friendly to the Catholic Church, even exploring it, left angry. A few days later a room titled, "There is no Salvation Inside the Catholic Church" was thriving with over 30 members. The folks who set-up the provocatively titled Catholic room are good people, with good intentions, but I think they miscalculated the unintended consequences of their actions. Once again, let's use the equation $G-B=PC$. While we can't know for sure, if so many people are being turned off (and I have talked to about 5 who were), this room title has turned more away from the faith than it brought to it. It also mobilized the anti-Catholic forces into starting their own room, a room which was unfortunately thriving. Despite any good intentions the owners of this room may have had, the collateral damage of their evangelism was too high.

We have talked about harsh and uncharitable evangelism, but other forms of evangelism can also turn people off. The three I want to look at are hokey, hyper-emotional, and deceitful evangelism techniques. First let me talk about the hokey techniques. I have seen a lot of hokey techniques over the years, but in my opinion, Christian book and gift stores take the cake here with many of their products. If there is a good product or logo out there, Christians will invariably rip it off for the sake of evangelism (or making a buck). Think of T-Shirts mimicking popular logos, fortune cookies with Bible verses, and so forth. While these may have some positive effects, most people probably either blow them off or tire quickly of "one-liners" and ripped off logos. I know I do.

I have also encountered my fair share of hyper-emotional evangelism. This evangelism appeals only to the emotion, and doesn't engage the mind. Think of televangelists crying or highly emotional "testimonies." I have no problem with testimonies, sharing what Christ has done for us. However, I have never been too convinced by ones loaded with what seems to be false emotion. I especially dislike ones that give the impression that if you accept Christ all your problems will disappear. I always felt like many of those giving testimonies looked down upon those of us who didn't screw up our lives with drugs, sex, etc, before believing in Jesus.

Unfortunately many individuals, myself included, aren't going to be convinced by an emotionally rousing testimony that is vacuous in other ways.



Finally, I think the worst form of evangelism involves deceit. One example that comes to mind was a Campus Crusade event I was involved with during my undergraduate days. Campus Crusade brought in a series of speakers to reach out to non-Christians, and the leaders suggested we give away prizes. So under a few select seats in the auditorium were sheets of paper indicating the person sitting there

had won a prize. It turns out that it was all rigged. The leaders really wanted this one particular kid, who looked like the singer Beck, to "get saved." So they made sure that he sat in the seat that had a winning paper under it. Sure enough, he won a new bike. The other prizes were similarly rigged. The Kingdom of God deserves better. I am sure if word got out about this, our Christian reputation for being honest and truthful individuals would be damaged. Also, when I worked as a waiter, some patrons would leave tracts that looked like money in lieu of tip. When the server read the tract, it said something like "are you disappointed it's not real money...we'll don't be disappointed because Jesus offers you something better than money." Many of the servers I worked with were single mothers barely making ends meet, and to be deprived of a tip and get a tract instead (a deceitful one at that) turned them off Christians. Clearly, deceitful methods have the most potential for collateral damage because they are so dishonest.

I guess my point in all of this is that evangelism must have a purpose, and that is to bring people to Christ. We must speak the truth in ways that are charitable and effective, not self-serving. The techniques, the discussion, the debate, the preaching, the blogging, and so forth, should be the vehicles of evangelism, not the ends themselves. The moment our discussions become bitter and venomous, or our blogs become filled with sarcastic Christian commentary, and we know people are building up walls to block out our faith, then we must immediately

stop. If we continue a pointless and angry debate, or constantly publish sarcastic and bitter blog entries even though the collateral damage has become too high, we have made an idol out of our techniques. In the examples I have mentioned above, harshness and silly marketing techniques have replaced Christ as the end of our activities. I think we must all keep this in mind when being witnesses of Christ.

Before I end, I want to elaborate on an issue I have touched upon throughout this essay: evangelism is a tricky thing. After all, Jesus' teachings turned off a lot of people. Many people just found his message too offensive to even consider following him. Some who had chosen to follow him later changed their minds. Jesus challenged people to something better and holier, and this didn't always go over well. Nonetheless, I believe there is a distinction between what Jesus did and the methods I criticize above. Jesus and his early followers were not concerned with getting lukewarm followers by any crazy means possible. After all, early Christians often met with torture or death because of their faith, and lukewarm followers weren't exactly beating down the doors of churches to join. So I think many modern "evangelism experts" are left with a problem: Jesus' method of evangelism wasn't always "effective" by modern standards. Thus, it is probably misleading to aim for "effective" evangelism, if by effective, we are talking primarily about numbers. However, we can speak of "biblical" evangelism, in which we share the good news of hope in Jesus with others in love. Using this method, people are left with a message of Truth presented in selfless and compassionate love, so that if they are offended, it is because of the message of Jesus itself, and not because of our silly or unloving behavior. So how do we do this? Act like Jesus at all times. Speak the truth when necessary in a loving way, but always show the mercy and compassion of Christ. Pray for those who persecute you and those whom you wish to lead to Christ. Evidence shows that it is not hokey tracts, harshness, or deceitful gimmicks that get people to come to know Jesus, but rather the influence of Christian friends. Yes, that's it. If you want to lead someone to Christ, simply act like Christ around your friends, invite them to church, and mention Christ when the right time arises.

And remember: love is the key. Without love anything we say or do will be like a clanging gong or clashing symbol. A paltalk example of the power of love: A gentleman opened an

anti-Catholic room. A few Catholics came into the room and engaged him in a reasonable discussion. In the end, the Catholics were praying for the room operator's mother. They were having a civil discussion and finding points that Catholics and Protestants agreed upon. At the end, the room operator said that while he disagreed with the Catholic Church, he would never open an anti-Catholic room again. I have yet to see a debate room have that effect... ever. Acting like Jesus did has its benefits!

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