

David Male and Paul Weston

THE
WORD'S
OUT

**Principles and strategies for
effective evangelism today**

Revised and updated edition

Foreword by Justin Welby, Archbishop of Canterbury

The Bible Reading Fellowship

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Contents

Foreword to the new edition	10
Introduction	11
1 How did we get here and where are we going? (David Male).....	14
2 A walk in the neighbourhood: evangelism and our culture (Paul Weston).....	29
PART 1: EVANGELISM AND THE NEW TESTAMENT (PAUL WESTON)	
3 What is evangelism?.....	46
4 Witnessing from the inside out	60
5 Apologetic evangelism?	76
6 Evangelism in three 'spaces'	91
PART 2: EVANGELISM AND THE LOCAL CHURCH (DAVID MALE)	
7 Why we need fishing nets, not safety nets.....	108
8 Finding your voice as a leader in evangelism	121
9 What's the connection between evangelism and discipleship?	137
10 Note to self: 'Why am I doing this?'	151
Further resources.....	163
Notes.....	170

Foreword to the new edition

What I like about this book is that it's not about the authors.

Don't get me wrong; I was delighted when Dave Male became head of the Discipleship and Evangelism Department for the Church of England, and I have known of Paul Weston's teaching for some time. But what I mean is that this book is clearly written to make an impact – and that impact is not to be impressed at the achievements of the writers, but to be equipped to participate.

In writing this book, Dave and Paul have performed a service to the church – they have laid out the history and practice, the how, the what and the where of evangelism. And they have done it in an informative and stimulating way. But the main thing they have done is given fuel to the why of evangelism. The why is of course a who: Jesus Christ.

This book, then, is an answer to prayer, because we regularly pray that God would equip his church with tools for the joyful task of proclaiming Jesus. This book is ultimately about Jesus. I pray the fruit of it will be seen in lives and communities that are transformed by his love.

Justin Welby, Archbishop of Canterbury

Introduction

This book comes out of our longing to see the ministry of evangelism reinstated, re-energised and reinvigorated in the church today. It started life during conversations over staff coffee at Ridley Hall, with the observation that evangelism seemed to have a low level of credibility among many church leaders and members. Research done by the London Institute for Contemporary Christianity (LICC) in 2010, as part of its 'Imagine' Project, suggests that 'evangelism is seen by many as simply doing strange things to strange people in strange places' and finds that 'many Christians are uncomfortable with the idea of their life as a witness or reject the idea outright'. At a recent evangelism training event, a courageous person spoke for many present when he said, 'I know I should do evangelism, but I don't want to, and I feel guilty.'

Our great concern is that *this* is the moment at which the church most needs to be involved in effective evangelism. All the figures clearly indicate that most people in westernised nations have very little knowledge of the Christian story, and churchgoing is no longer part of mainstream culture for the great majority. Peter Brierley's work on church attendance in Britain over the last 30 years estimates that attendance as a percentage of the UK population has halved to 4.7%. Moreover, this churchgoing population is also an ageing population. According to the 2016 Mission Statistics of the Church of England, of those attending Anglican churches regularly, 20% were under the age of 18 and 31% were aged 70 or over.

Ironically, today we seem to have lots of talk about the importance of mission and yet very little about the priority of evangelism in our mission strategies. It can even seem at times as if the word 'missional' can encompass everything except evangelism. The

American market-research guru George Barna sums up the problem when he states, 'How ironic that during this period of swelling need for the proclamation of the gospel... the ranks of the messengers have dissipated to anaemic proportions.'¹

Our simple conviction is that at a time when the church is declining quickly and also rapidly losing confidence in evangelism, the need to get 'the word out' is more pressing than ever. So how can we enable others to connect with Jesus and his people in meaningful ways? How can we introduce the good news in ways that engage rather than turn off our hearers? How can we think more constructively about how to engage our culture with the message of the gospel? What is certain is that we cannot afford simply to sit back and do nothing. This is a crucial time for the church to get the word out.

Our hope for this book, therefore, is that it will not only remind the church of the vital importance of evangelism but it will also suggest some ways forward in our thinking and practice. We long to see the church, across denominations and traditions, engaged in more effective evangelism and, through God's grace, seeing transformation in the lives of individuals and communities.

We have each contributed different parts of the book, although we freely commented on each other's work. We have found ourselves in broad agreement, even though, on detail, we may have differed.

After two introductory chapters (one by David on how we have arrived at our current position and the other by Paul on our culture's impact on the ways we engage in evangelism), the main body of the book is divided into two parts.

Paul has written Part 1, 'Evangelism and the New Testament'. His aim here has been to reflect on a number of central issues in evangelism from a cultural and biblical perspective. He hopes to stimulate fresh thinking on the whole subject of how we think about and practise evangelism.

David has written Part 2, 'Evangelism and the local church'. He writes from a wealth of experience in evangelism and pioneering new forms of church, and suggests some practical ways of earthing the principles of biblical evangelism in the ongoing life of churches and Christian communities.

4

Witnessing from the inside out

Paul Weston

In this chapter and the next, I want to talk in more detail about the words we use in our evangelism. What do we actually say when we evangelise? And how do we help ourselves to develop patterns of speaking that are both faithful to the gospel and culturally relevant to those who hear us? I will assume that much may have happened beforehand. We will have been developing relationships, praying for opportunities and so forth – everything that Paul talks about in the Colossians passage we were considering at the end of the last chapter. But now we get to the point of saying something. What is it? And what do we think we are doing?

Let me begin with a proposition. In a nutshell, I believe that whereas most of us tend to be ‘outside-in’ evangelists, Jesus was an ‘inside-out’ one. Many of our evangelistic methodologies have been shaped by the generations that preceded us and tend to assume too much of our hearers. We are coming out of an era (many would say that we have already left it) in which the kind of vocabulary and ideas we used meant at least something to those we were trying to reach. Nowadays the Bible is largely a foreign book, and the language of traditional Christian belief comes across as strange and unfamiliar. Yet we often persist in our evangelistic efforts as if nothing had really changed. We

go on assuming a Christian framework for the ‘religious’ words we use, and we take for granted that our contemporaries understand the theological ‘map’ that will help to make sense of them.

How, then, can we evangelise? Unfortunately, there are no easy answers or instant ‘fixes’ to these challenges, no handy ‘how-to’ kits on how to share the gospel in our contemporary post-Christian society. Nonetheless, in what follows I want to make some suggestions that may help to stimulate fresh practice and confidence. My main contention is stunningly straightforward: the time is ripe for a re-examination and reappropriation of Jesus’ spoken evangelistic methodology as it is recorded in the gospels. I want to defend the notion that the idea of ‘evangelism’ is best understood as any process that allows Jesus to bear witness to himself in his own words. I argue that this approach has often been neglected in the past but is very appropriate in engaging a postmodern story-based culture and therefore helps particularly to meet the needs of our generation.

Evangelism modern and postmodern

If we take a look at the gospel tracts or models that have been in vogue in our evangelistic methodologies over the past several decades, we will find that the majority systematise the gospel message into a number of elements, principles or propositions. These summary statements of the good news – whether it be the ‘Four Spiritual Laws’, the ‘Bridge to Life’, ‘Knowing God Personally’ or ‘Two Ways to Live’⁵⁹ – are designed to be easily remembered and easy to pass on to others.

I don’t want in any way to dismiss these approaches, which have proved so fruitful to many in the past. I simply want to raise some points to consider in relation to evangelism and the shifting patterns of contemporary culture.

First, these models tend to presuppose a grasp of Christian vocabulary in which concepts like creation, sin, wrath, judgment, atonement, salvation and so on make some sort of sense. In addition, they assume a degree of knowledge of how these doctrinal ideas fit together and relate to one another – a kind of theological ‘map’. Perhaps, in a cultural context with a residue of Christian vocabulary and understanding, such presentations were at least partially comprehensible, but my experience is that they start much too far down the line for most non-Christians. The necessary grasp of basic Christian theology and vocabulary is, as we have already said, becoming increasingly rare.

Second, I wonder whether this approach to presenting the gospel reflects biblical patterns of evangelism or not. Succinct statements of the gospel are certainly present within the New Testament. You could, for example, point to Paul’s summary of the identity of Jesus as Messiah in Romans 1:1–4, his overview of Jesus’ redemptive work in 1 Corinthians 15:1–9 or the so-called ‘hymn to Christ’ in Philippians 2:5–11. In addition, the sermons recorded by Luke in Acts have been seen to follow a pattern that incorporates consistent elements.⁶⁰ Other New Testament writers, such as John, also occasionally draw together material in summary form for the benefit of readers.⁶¹

However, many of these examples appear in letters addressed to those who are already believers (as the examples in Romans, 1 Corinthians and Philippians demonstrate). Their function is to teach or remind believers of the faith that they have already received so that they can remember and build upon it. Then, Luke’s tendency to systematise the gospel presentations in Acts can blur the fact that both the cultural context of the audience and the questions raised by the different hearers appear to be more significant in the formulation of the sermons than is the desire to systematise the message.⁶² Also, the number of summary statements in the gospels is actually very small. Where they do occur, they are mostly limited to John’s gospel, and they function primarily as teaching aids, drawing together and summarising material, rather than as

examples that suggest a way of communicating the gospel to non-believers.

If we understand the gospel message as a summary series of statements or propositions, evangelism can be understood as the way we work towards such presentations and defend the different parts of the structure. But what can often happen is that the good news we attempt to present comes across as a kind of alien ‘package’, unrelated to the context of the other person’s experience of life and needing to be defended from a range of perspectives that are not necessarily beneficial to sharing the good news about Jesus.

We might start, for example, by saying (1) that God created the world, continue by showing (2) how it has turned in rebellion against him, and then explain (3) that God sent Jesus to die and (4) that we might therefore be forgiven. In doing so, we cover an awful lot of theology that will need extensive unpacking and explanation, but also, before we get past Point 1, we will probably be sidetracked into having to explain why, if God created the world, it is in the state that it is. This is something of a caricature, but you get the point. We’ve effectively moved away from evangelism and into ‘secondary’ apologetics. Then we begin to panic and wonder how on earth we are going to get the discussion back to Jesus.

‘Outside-in’ evangelism

The style of evangelism I’ve just described, with its accompanying framework of assumptions about evidence and apologetics, is what I will call an ‘outside-in’ approach. When a question is raised by a non-Christian, the evangelist seeks to work towards a presentation of the gospel either by means of his or her own opinions (‘It’s interesting you say that, but I think that...’) or by means of some form of rational supporting evidence (‘There is actually enough good evidence for you to take Christianity seriously...’ or ‘I’m sure we can agree that...’). What follows is usually a discussion about relative assumptions and

presuppositions in which the evangelist's thinking is pitted more or less effectively against that of the listener. To be sure, this method often stimulates the mind but it rarely focuses upon the gospel. My own experience of this type of approach is that too much time is spent arguing around the philosophical and historical 'fringes' of the gospel, seldom reaching the point of explaining the good news itself.

'Inside-out' evangelism

My own practice of evangelism changed when I took a closer look at the gospel material. In contrast to a style of evangelism that revolved around effectively packaging the gospel in a schema that I could remember and reuse, the gospel material seemed much more fluid and – in a proper sense – 'occasional'. As Walter Hollenweger has put it, 'We find everywhere the same pattern: the starting point of Jesus' evangelism is mostly (though not always) a question, or the concrete situation of the people around him... New Testament evangelism does not start from a proposition. It starts from a situation.' He continues, 'Where we can observe the process of evangelism in the New Testament it is almost always in the form of stories which are sparked off by the situation of the listeners and worked out in dialogue with them.'⁶³

This immediately set me thinking. Why is it that the gospel materials are as they are, with a whole variety of ways in which Jesus describes the meaning of the kingdom? If Jesus had been more formulaic, the gospels would have been a great deal shorter, with the content arranged differently. But, as Hollenweger puts it, 'One has to account for the fact that the four evangelists thought it vital to describe Jesus's evangelism *as a dialogical and situational approach*. There can be no doubt that they thought this approach essential to the content of the Good News.'⁶⁴

The first thing to notice is that most of Jesus' evangelistic opportunities arose out of ordinary conversations – often about secular and

seemingly mundane concerns. For example, the sublime teaching on his identity as the one through whom men and women would worship God the Father ‘in Spirit and in truth’ begins with a simple request to a Samaritan woman for a drink on a hot day (John 4:7–26). Again, in answer to a question about wealth and inheritance recorded in Luke 12:13, Jesus sidesteps the responsibility of arbitrating between the questioner and his brother (v. 14) and instead uses the opportunity to point up the folly of greed by telling the story of the ‘rich fool’ (vv. 16–21). In the light of the imminent coming of the kingdom, what’s really needed, he says, is ‘richness towards God’ (v. 21). On another occasion, a lawyer’s question, ‘Who is my neighbour?’ (Luke 10:29), prompts Jesus to tell the story that has come to be known as the parable of the good Samaritan. Once again, a seemingly mundane question is taken as an opportunity to show that, in the kingdom of God, accepted thinking about family and ‘bonds’ is reorientated to include those hitherto considered to be racially impure or inferior (vv. 29–37). The story ends in a challenge to a radical change of perspective and action: ‘Go and do likewise’ (v. 37).

A second thing to notice in these evangelistic encounters is that Jesus neither over-systematises the message nor appears to be working towards any kind of schematic gospel presentation. On the contrary, he responds to each question on its own terms and addresses it in the light of the coming kingdom of God. By doing so, he not only sheds light on the meaning of the gospel itself but also calls for a particular response of faith. In fact, nearly all the stories and ‘sermons’ we know so well from the gospels (which we often detach from their original settings) started from specific questions and issues raised by sceptics and listeners in the course of Jesus’ travels. They were not ‘setpiece’ sermons prepared for formal religious occasions but brilliant examples of Jesus’ conversational evangelism in action. No question is outside the scope of the kingdom’s relevance, for the kingdom of God is about the rightful rule of God over all matters, both secular and sacred – our finances, our relationships, human identity, neighbourliness, social responsibilities, and so forth.

A third point is the number of times Jesus uses questions in the course of his evangelistic conversations. The statistics are striking: Matthew's gospel records 94 questions on the lips of Jesus, Mark records 59, Luke has 82 and John has 49. Questions come in different categories, of course. Some could be described as 'closed' questions, in the sense that they only require a one-word answer (for example, 'Are you free?'). Others are 'open', in that they invite a deeper level of sharing, either by asking for more information or by inviting some sort of emotional response (such as 'How did you feel about that?'). Most of Jesus' questions are in the second category, either inviting his hearers to reflect on what he has just said to them or challenging them to think more deeply about the words they themselves have spoken.⁶⁵

Jesus as an example in evangelism

I want to suggest that the 'primary' evangelistic material in the New Testament is to be found in the gospel accounts themselves. This approach seems to make best sense of the gospel narratives as we have them, and indicates that an integral part of their purpose is not just to disciple believers but to 'evangelise' non-believers. They are not simply stories that help to 'illustrate' the gospel, which is to be found later in the more 'doctrinal' parts of the New Testament. No, these stories are themselves the substance of good news about Jesus.

John's gospel is the most explicit in this respect, stating that his collection of Jesus stories is written down 'so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name' (John 20:31). The positioning of this climactic statement is straight after the post-resurrection story about 'doubting Thomas' (vv. 24–29). Thomas was not present when Jesus first revealed himself to the disciples after his resurrection, and when they tell him that they have seen Jesus, he says, 'Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and

put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe' (v. 25).

When Jesus appears to the disciples a week later, Thomas is with them and comes to see that Jesus is indeed 'Lord and God' (v. 28). Jesus responds with a question – 'Have you believed because you have seen me?' – and then a statement: 'Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe' (v. 29). The question brings up the potential problem for the disciples in their missionary task, that bringing people to faith must surely be related to seeing Jesus in the flesh. But the statement transcends this limitation and opens up the possibility of a saving faith that is no longer dependent upon seeing Jesus in person. In the summary verse that follows (v. 31) John says, in effect, that his intention in writing the gospel is precisely to make this new kind of 'seeing' possible for future generations. In the retelling of his gospel stories, Jesus will continue to be both seen and heard, and may be met in faith and trust, even though Jesus himself has physically departed. Not only, then, do these stories proclaim Jesus by describing what he said and did, but they also effectively 're-image' him in a way that makes him truly 'present' across the ages, enabling hearers and readers in future generations both to see Jesus and to respond to him.

How might this be done? I am not suggesting for one moment that we are able to imitate or reproduce Jesus' technique. What I am suggesting is that we train ourselves to use Jesus' own words in our evangelistic conversations, and that we pray for the divine insight and the Spirit's intuitive help to connect these words with contemporary questions. We take the gospel narratives as our material starting point and seek to find the dynamic equivalents between the issues that Jesus addressed in his day and those that our contemporary hearers face in our own time. This, it seems to me, is the essence of the evangelistic task. We want to bear witness to Jesus, the good news, by allowing him to draw attention to himself in his own words.

Let me try to illustrate this line of thinking in very practical terms. For some years now, I have attempted to engage in this 'inside-out' style of apologetics by setting myself certain aims in answering the questions that non-Christians ask. I have begun to erase the 'I think...' component of my responses, which belonged to the 'outside-in' style, and have tried to start my replies along the lines of, 'It is interesting that you say that... *Jesus* was once asked a similar question and *he* said...', or, 'That's an interesting situation you describe... *Jesus* was once involved in a similar situation and *his* response was...'

This approach seeks to bypass the more traditional 'bridging' material and cut straight to the chase. Of course there may still be a need to engage in further apologetic argument, but the aim is to prevent these secondary debates from derailing the evangelistic thrust. My aim at these points is to lead the discussion back to the words and teaching of Jesus.

Having done so, I then find it helpful to 'press the logic' of what Jesus says towards its larger implications. Jesus does this consistently, challenging his hearers to encompass the immensity of the kingdom vision and then challenging them to place their trust in him as its proper king. We should do the same. What I have found helpful in this regard is to keep in the back of my mind the four main titles used of Jesus in the sermons recorded in the Acts of the Apostles. These are 'Lord', 'Christ', 'Saviour' and 'Judge'.⁶⁶ Each represents an ultimate truth about Jesus, of which each gospel story is an illustration. We have been used to talking of Jesus as Saviour, and many of our gospel tracts have understandably majored on this aspect of his work, but the other titles are equally prominent, with the title 'Judge' being most prominent when non-Jewish audiences are being addressed (see, for example, Acts 10:42; 17:31). So I keep these end-goals in mind as I retell the stories. Sometimes the conversation will take this direction naturally, but I find it useful nonetheless as an aide-memoire.



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