

Elemental Evangelism

by Timmy Brister

Elemental Evangelism, Part 1

Posted October 10th, 2007 by Timmy Brister

In the midst of the series on SBC, I shared briefly some of my experiences regarding evangelism (see [here](#) and [here](#)). I struggled with whether or not to post excerpts of my life outside the blogworld for several reasons, mainly because I know my proud heart and how easily it is to acknowledge spiritual performance rather than my absolute dependence upon God. I also know that I, like most of you, am your average Joe Christian. I am a 28 year old seminary student who works part-time at UPS in the middle of the night who, outside this blog, would be known by a very small number of people. I do not pretend to be a celebrity nor do I care to project that idea through the virtual world of blogging. In any case, I really appreciate the encouraging words I have received both on and off the record. If there is anyway I encourage folks to live, breathe, share, and demonstrate the gospel, then I am thrilled to be a small part of that.

In light of the apparent interest, I thought I would briefly mention **seven elements of evangelism** that I have comprised my efforts in sharing the gospel with others. There is nothing really profound here, but I do think they would be helpful to think about. I suppose they would run in a logical or sequential order, though these elements often overlap. Here they are:

1. Missional/Contextual

As a Christian, I understand that I bear the responsibility of the Great Commission to go as one who is “sent.” This means I must know where I am going (context) and why I am going there (mission). Not only am I called to be a good student and exegete of Scripture, but I am also called to be a good student and exegete of culture as well. This means I must learn the thoughts, beliefs, and worldviews of the world around me. I listen to their lives, learn of their interests, ask questions about matters important to them. With each person, I am taking mental notes and being careful to remember the information I have acquired. The importance of doing this is to know how to clearly and effectively communicate the gospel in that given context.

Being missional means that your evangelism is going to be more than a “plan of salvation” or merely four points and a prayer. It means that you will learn of the struggles of your coworkers, asking permission to pray for them in their situation. It means that you show kindness and generosity in serving them in practical ways that show the love and graciousness of God. Finally it means that you demonstrate that you want to be a more permanent fixture in their lives, not just fly-by Christian here to deliver the goods. We are not here just to deliver the mail but also to help them read it (teaching) and know the person who authored it (God).

2. Relational/Personal

In the current milieu, evangelism almost by necessity has to be relational and personal. Effective evangelism occurs when you have cultivated a relationship with that person who no longer considers him a prospect and is no longer suspect of your motives. There should be conversations that are taking place about life, hobbies, news, or whatever that is not necessarily spiritual. The two most meaningful places to build relationships with unbelievers is in your neighborhood and at your workplace. This is because you have natural avenues inherent in your daily life where everyday contact is possible. Let me give you a couple of examples in my own life how this has worked.

The first person God sent me to was Dan. Dan is politically liberal, philosophically minded, and loves photography. Through these three avenues (politics, philosophy, and photography), I was able to become good friends with Dan (even though we disagreed on areas in the political and philosophical end). Within a matter of two months, Dan gave his life to Christ, and I gave my free time to photography. Another person at work I was hoping to reach was my supervisor Tony. Tony is a very outgoing guy who is a fantastic bowler (he does the tournament circuit, has the bag, two balls, the whole works). So I happened to challenge Tony to a game of bowling on Friday afternoon. The result of this challenge was that every Friday afternoon for a month, Tony and I spend the afternoon bowling together which eventually led to an early dinner close by. The last two times we went, three other coworkers tagged along - none of them who know Jesus. During that time, I shared my testimony and the gospel with Tony several times, and though he is not a believer (yet), our friendship has become personal and meaningful.

So what's my point here? I took a personal investment in two people. I found out what their hobbies and passions were. For Dan it was photography, so we spent evenings together in the bitter cold in downtown Louisville with him teaching me how to shoot night shots. For Tony, it was bowling, so we spent Friday afternoons at the bowling lanes where we would end up challenging each other to 3-4 games with a dinner to follow. Here's the deal. At work, my dealings with Tony and Dan were superficially connected because it was work-related. However, when our friendship continued outside work, it became more meaningful, and they became more open to hearing the gospel as opportunities abounded. Furthermore, they got to see me outside work, in everyday life, as a follower of Christ. How much exposure of a Christian up close like this had they had before? Have they ever seen the gospel at work in the life of a Christian? Through the time and investment I made with these two guys, the misconceptions they might have had of a Christian were removed, and I was given numerous opportunities in natural contexts to share Jesus in bowling alleys and downtown Louisville.

As a Christian, when friendships are developed with unbelievers in your world, you will begin to love them in a way you could not had you not dwelt among them, ate with them, and spent meaningful time with them. This love is what should saturate our gospel presentations and also break our hearts for their need of Jesus. I may not be a good photographer or a good bowler, but I do want to be a good lover of lost people. I may not be an outgoing person or charismatic person, but I do want to communicate the gospel with my words *and* with my life.

Some of the questions we must ask ourselves are,

- >> “How well do I know and understand the thoughts, worldviews, and feelings of the unbelievers in my world?”
- >> “To whom is God sending me?”
- >> “Who am I building a relationship with for the sake of the gospel?”
- >> “Am I willing to make the personal investment in their lives, even when it doesn’t seem fruitful?”

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3. Apologetical

As I begin to build a relationship with unbelievers, I piece together their worldview which is based on presuppositions they hold (whether they realize that or not). I have unbelieving friends who are atheists, agnostics, deists, New Age, Hindu, and Roman Catholic. However, many of the people I talk to have only a nominal understanding to what they believe. The purpose of me being apologetical is not to win an argument with my unbelieving friend; rather, I want to win them to Christ! In order to do that, however, I want to “destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to the obedience of Christ” (2 Cor. 10:4-6). My goal is to gently but convincingly deconstruct their worldview and expose their presuppositions as dangerously false and perilous. Lest we forget, we are in a spiritual war where our enemy uses the schemes of this world and his lies to “blind the minds of unbelievers” (2 Cor. 4:4). In this war for their souls, the mind plays an integral part, and I make it my goal to present biblical arguments to dismantle their presuppositions (control beliefs) so that they no longer control their thinking anymore.

I should mention here that being merely apologetical is not evangelism, as Mark Dever is correct to assert in his new book, *The Gospel and Personal Evangelism*. However, apologetics plays an important, preparatory role in getting to the gospel message. If we neglect or minimize this part of exposing the folly or error of their beliefs, there is a real possibility that they will syncretize the Christian message to their beliefs and will continue to be a barrier to understanding the gospel.

4. Doctrinal/Biblical

After deconstruction comes *reconstruction*. We must lay a foundation based on the biblical narrative of God, creation, fall, redemption, and restoration. This metanarrative, or big story which explains all other stories, replaces the old understanding of life, man, God, salvation, etc. This is why biblical theology (the discipline) is so important. Don’t get me wrong. I am a big fan of systematic theology, but systematic theology builds on biblical theology. For instance, I cannot talk about sin, depravity, and eternal punishment for sin unless I first talk about God (character), creation, and the Fall. We are living in a day where the categories of sin and justice are no longer in the post-Christian mind. Focusing on the biblical narrative and God’s work in

redemptive history creates a framework and re-establishes the categories that have become diminished or discarded through postmodern influences. The error in so many gospel presentations or plans of salvation comes when they fail because *they have the wrong starting point*. We cannot begin with John 3:16 but rather must start with Genesis 1:1. We cannot jump into a discussion about theological truths without establishing a grid through which they are to rightly understand them. Therefore, the reconstruction entails not only the substance of their thinking but the structure of it as well.

I am also a big fan of teaching and explaining doctrines in my evangelism, and there is considerable biblical warrant for stressing doctrine in our evangelistic practices. Take for instance the parable of the soils. Of the four soils where the seed was planted, only one brought forth lasting fruit. What was the difference? Jesus explained, “As for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it” ([Matt. 13:23](#)). All four heard the word, but only one *understood* it. So what is the goal of the evangelist if you want to be fruitful? It is to so present the gospel that unbelievers understand who God is, why they are guilty and condemned through sin, what God has done for them in Christ, and how they are to be saved. Last year, there was a coworker who I had shared the gospel with almost a dozen times. The week before she received Jesus, I spend an hour Wednesday night before work explaining the doctrine of justification by faith and why good works could never save her (she came from a Roman Catholic background). Thursday night I spent an hour talking about regeneration and how the Holy Spirit works to convict us of sin, draw us to Christ, and give us new life. On Friday night, I spent another hour explaining to her what biblical repentance and saving faith is and why this responsibility of turning from sin and turning to God was her responsibility. Sunday night after church, my wife and I took her out for dinner where we talked about the great exchange and the substitutionary atonement of Christ. The next day she came to Christ.

I recognize that the opening of their eyes is solely the work of God through the agency of the Holy Spirit. However, God has ordained a means and instrumentality through the proclamation and impartation of God’s truth revealed in Scripture. The glorious gospel is so rich, enlivening, powerful, and experimental (to use the old Puritan vernacular) that we cannot begin to plunge its depths. Investing our times and energies in understanding the gospel and the doctrines therein becomes a fountain that overflows with joy inexpressible and full of glory. I am reminded of what Tom Wells says in his book on missions: those who know God best are most equipped and responsible to speak well of him (my paraphrase). The greater we know God and his gospel, the more equipped we are to share Jesus with others and the more responsible we are as well.

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After having presented the truths of the gospel, the next two elements necessarily follow, viz. being confrontational and pastoral.

5. Confrontational

Saving faith has historically been understood to carry three aspects: *notitia* (knowledge), *assensus* (assent), and *fiducia* (trust). What doctrinal evangelism through a biblical theological approach does is provide a healthy and rich dose of gospel truths to the minds of unbelievers. Two things I should mention here. There is no such thing as blind faith. God has given us a revelation that is both personal and propositional. Sinners put their faith into the truths they understand, the God who is real and has disclosed Himself to them (revelation) through Scripture (the written Word) and Jesus Christ (Living Word). Secondly, faith is not merely the intellectual acquisition (knowledge) or even agreement of the truths (assent); rather, saving faith is an attitude of dependence and act of trust where we appropriate the truths we have come to understand and agree. Simply put, we make them our own.

It is here where I call my unbelieving friends to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ. I remind them that they are no better off for simply having heard the good news of Jesus Christ. It must become good news *for them*. The question Jesus asked in his day, “Who do you say that I am?” is a question everyone must come to terms with, for God is calling all men everywhere to repent.

There were many who followed Jesus for the miracles he could offer or the amazing sermons he could deliver, but only few counted the cost to take up their cross and follow Jesus. This accounting is nothing short of declaring “Jesus is Lord” and experiencing that truth in our hearts and lives. It is an emphatic “YES” to everything that God is for us in His Son Jesus Christ.

6. Pastoral

The Puritans often called the work of a minister as a “physician of the soul.” When dealing with a sinner under conviction who has been confronted with their need to trust in Jesus, knowing how to address an illumined mind, wounded conscience, and broken heart is crucial. I want to press the law to expose their need for alien righteousness (that is, from Christ) and appeal to the promises of the gospel that Jesus will not cast out any that will come to Him. Knowing that the Shepherd will call out His sheep, my goal is to put as much Scripture before them as possible, confident that, as they hear the voice of the Good Shepherd, those who are called will follow.

One of the most difficult challenges I see at the point of decision is to not manipulate a sinner or try to force a decision by praying a prayer or any other superficial means. It is tempting to deal lightly with sinners by providing them a false sense of security, that after a prayer or whatever, we quickly say “Welcome to the family of God!” The fact is, I don’t know whether at that moment true conversion had taken place, for only God knows their hearts. If the Spirit has regenerated a sinner to new life where they in turn trust Jesus and turn from their sin, the fruit of that will become evident, but it is not my place to make any priestly pronouncement or appease their consciences. No one would trust a physician who treats cancer patients with Scooby-Doo bandaids. The truth is that the soul of my friend is before me, and the way I handle the gospel and counsel them pastorally has eternal significance.

Lastly, I understand that when a person who I shared the gospel with becomes a Christian, I am personally responsible to help them grow in Christ. Conversion isn’t the end but the beginning. These friends who have watched me live, pray, read my Bible, and witness with others will come

alongside me and will do it together. Paul had much to say about being spiritual fathers and mothers to new Christians who are infants in Christ. We cannot expect new Christians to be as mature or sanctified as those who have walked with Christ for years. Therefore, being pastoral in leading them to Christ as well as caring for their spiritual growth should be the natural implications of evangelism and desire of our hearts. To the Thessalonians, Paul stated that he desired to share not only the gospel of God but also his entire life because they had become so dear to him (1 Thess. 2:8). To the Philippians, he speaks how he longs for them with the affection of Christ Jesus (Phil. 1:8). To the Galatians, he said that he was who was spiritual in labor until Christ was formed in them (Gal. 4:19). To the Corinthians, he stated that he became a father to them through the gospel (1 Cor. 4:15). Here is a man, an evangelist who understood that evangelism means much more than making converts. It means making disciples—a task that will require giving our lives for years to come. It is a task where the gospel is central in constant in our conversations in winning them to Christ and also in seeing them grow in Christ. Indeed, the need to be confrontational and pastoral is at the heart of the Great Commission.

[Elemental Evangelism, Part 4](#)

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My last element to evangelism is the most important. From beginning to end, I make it my ambition for evangelism to be doxological. A brief explanation:

7. Doxological

The question I must ask myself is, “*Why* do you evangelize?” I can remember a point in my life where I was determined to lead “x” number of people to Christ each year. I was passionate about evangelism, but the beginning and end was always about *me*. It was not long afterwards that I realized that an overwhelming number of those who had “accepted Christ” did not join the church, follow in believer’s baptism, or grow in grace. It was great to report back to the church on those who had prayed the sinner’s prayer, but those celebrations were short-lived as I realized I was making converts who had not really been converted as a follower of Christ. Many of them would at best look back at that time and find that their guilty conscience was appeased and their minds were assured that they would go to heaven when they die with little reference to Jesus Christ.

The way I evangelized began to quickly change as I came to understand that we were created to display God’s glory and worship him with our lives. Evangelism wasn’t simply to help people get to heaven when they die; rather, it was to help them understand that the one life they have to live is to be spent in treasuring the infinite worth of knowing Jesus Christ. We define sin in our evangelistic presentations as sinners “falling short of the glory of God.” That rolls off our lips and seldom do we consider the significance of that statement. Sinners in rebellion against God have made much of sin. They have glorified it with their lives. To fall short of the glory of God is to fail to make much of Christ and glorify him with our lives. Romans 1-3 reveals that this falling short includes all men—Jews and Gentiles alike—who need their lives changed by life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. After another eight chapters of explaining the gospel of justification and new life in Christ, Paul sums up Romans 1-11 by saying,

Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!

“For who has known the mind of the Lord,
or who has been his counselor?”

“Or who has given a gift to him
that he might be repaid?”

For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.

Evangelism that is doxological recognizes that salvation is all of God. The plan of salvation (predestination) of sinners is “*from Him*.” The accomplishment of salvation (atonement) is “*through Him*.” And the goal of salvation is “*to Him*” - that is, to His glory. Therefore, it is my motivation in evangelism that God would be glorified in the advance of the gospel in the lives of unbelievers. It is my evangelistic ambition that sinners who have glorified sin and made much of this world would glorify Jesus and make Him their Treasure. This evangelistic vision is to see that sinners embrace Jesus as *better* than what life can offer *now* and what death can take later.

So practically, how does this affect my evangelism? It means that the goal of the gospel is not simply that one would go to heaven when they die while their entire life is devoid of worship and the glory due His name. No. This cannot be, because God *is* the gospel. The good news is not a free ticket to heaven or walking streets of gold. The good news is Jesus Christ. Therefore, everything I do in presenting the gospel is presenting the supremacy of Jesus Christ in all of his excellencies, promises, offices, and work. I tell sinners that becoming a Christian is a believing in Jesus that rivets our affections, transforms our thoughts, and reorients our lives so that we display the greatness of Jesus Christ in a world that tries to make him look so small and insignificant. The gospel is inherently doxological because God has shown in our hearts “the light of the knowledge of *the glory of God* in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor. 4:6). Peter tells us that we have been saved so that we may *proclaim* the excellencies of him who called us out of darkness into his marvelous light (1 Pet. 2:9). So evangelism is a proclamation *of* God grounded in praise *to* God. If worship doesn’t fuel my passion to evangelize, then nothing will. Yet, worship is not only the source of inspiration of evangelism, but it is also the goal of evangelism as John Piper so astutely puts it.

In summary, evangelism is a glorious privilege and task that is nothing short of bringing worshipers before the throne of Jesus who purchased them with his blood. The gospel is radically God-centered, and so is evangelism. It is not about us, as though we could make a name for ourselves by bringing people into the kingdom. It is not about them, as though God was incomplete without them. No. Evangelism and the gospel with which we have been entrusted carries the weight of glory that burdens our hearts for the lost and for a thousand tongues to sing praises to our God and King. I cannot speak and sing enough about Jesus. But with this tongue, I can spread the gospel to others with a passion that they join me in exulting in our Savior with one voice comprised of many tongues that are preoccupied with the worship and fame of His name.

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