

Evangelizing Your Neighbors

Prayer & Partnership

John 4:34-38

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Bethany Church

Wesley J. Gabel

I remember the excitement I felt when I first learned to hear God's voice and experienced amazing confirmations. I watched a wife and daughter keep vigil for weeks over a dying man. Some time after the funeral I felt an urge to visit them. I dropped what I was doing, drove to their house and knocked on the door. Voices were arguing inside. Somewhat embarrassed, the daughter confessed their argument when I entered the kitchen. I had a strong conviction that I knew what was at root in the conflict. The daughter, like the Samaritan woman we'll soon discuss, had been married many times; and I asked her, "Did your father hurt you? Did he abuse you sexually?" Her mouth dropped open, "How do you know?" God had prepared me to see that and to ask that question. In those moments, years of bitterness, confusion and guilt flowed. "We feel like hypocrites!" the mother exclaimed. "We weren't at his side because we loved him. We were there because we felt so guilty hating him!" Right there, God began to heal them.

Some people say that it is okay to talk to God, but that when you start hearing back you need a shrink. I've found that you make a tremendous impact only when you hear from God. Genuine prayer is conversation, not a monologue. When you converse with God, you hear; and you experience divine appointments. You find that you are in certain places at certain times with a special assignment. That is exactly what happens with me and also with Jesus.

In the fourth chapter of John's gospel, Jesus had passed near a Samaritan village and his disciples had left him to get food while he rested near a well. It was noon and the sun baked both the earth and anyone outside. Consequently, most people visited the well during the cool of the morning or evening. However, a Samaritan woman came there

because she wanted to avoid her neighbors. She was not liked. She caused much turmoil. Five times she had been married. Five times she was kicked out or let go. Who knows how many children she had by the different men? When she met Jesus, she wasn't married, but she was living with a man. As she approached the well, she had no idea that she had a divine appointment. What transpired is evangelism. Jesus evangelized this woman. Jesus brought her good news.

The Samaritan woman heard good news in that she received *attention*. Other people avoided and shunned her. Jesus, however, not only noticed her; he asked for her help, a drink of water. He valued her life and service. The Samaritan woman was surprised. She heard good news also in that she received *answers*. Jesus responded to her questions and focused on her needs. Her deep needs mattered. The Samaritan woman was evangelized in that she received *affirmation*. God directed Jesus with just the insight and words that helped this woman see that she mattered to God and that God was reaching out to her. The messiah, the anointed one of God had come to her.

Evangelism is unlike many of our assumptions and beliefs. We are called to evangelize, not *indoctrinate* our neighbors. Evangelizing is not convincing people to believe something. God may prompt us to share the reason why we have hope, but evangelism is not indoctrination. Evangelism is not converting or changing people's minds. Only God can convert. Only God can change a mind.

The word *evangelize* occurs 55 times in the New Testament and comes from two Greek terms. The first is "eu," which means good, and the second is "angello," which means to share or announce. Thus, the term *evangelize* means to share or announce good. Because of Jesus's special relationship with God, he could share or announce what was good for a needy Samaritan woman. Because of the disciples' relationship with Jesus, they could share what was good for their Palestinian neighbors. Because of our fellowship with Jesus, we can share what is good for our neighbors. We can bring them good news.

Jesus was energized by what happened with the Samaritan woman. When his disciples came back with food, Jesus didn't need it. He was pumped. When you evangelize like Jesus, it becomes your *food*. You realize you're sent. You know that you are doing what God wants. You are partnering with God and actually fulfilling his plan, completing his work. You feel such gratification. You hunger for nothing else. You want to evangelize.

It becomes your *vision*. You look at people differently. "Open your eyes and look at the fields," Jesus said to his disciples. He wanted them to see their neighbors differently. They are needy and ready to believe. They want to know that there is a God who can make a difference in their lives and who really cares about them. Can you show them that? Do you realize that God has made you their priest who can help them?

When you do, it becomes your *joy*. It becomes your joy because you realize that you're part of a team God is using to change lives forever. It is such a relief and kick to know that I'm part of a team. As a result, I've watched young and old become so free and so at peace. I've had people drive hundreds of miles to tell me the difference Diane and I made.

Deep down you hunger to make a difference. You hunger because you were born to make a difference; and when you partner with God, you will make a difference.

I was deeply committed to Christ when I started college, and I believed my college classmates needed Jesus. I could tell that so many were searching and making destructive decisions. For three years I tried to evangelize them by indoctrinating or converting them. Nothing happened. My final three months. I did something different. Each morning at 5:30 a.m. my roommate and I got up and prayed together. If you saw me at 5:30 in the morning, you'd realize what a chore that was. Together we'd pray for every young man on our dorm floor, and each day I spent time getting to know them and enjoy them. A month or so later we started a six week Bible Study. One third of the men on my floor came and some experienced life-changing conversions. In fact, my roommate and I became a legend to some.

If Christ is making a real difference in your life, you'll want to evangelize your neighbors. You'll want to share some of your good fortune. You'll want to share with them what is truly and uniquely good for them. That will begin only when you *intercede*! You can make a difference in your neighbors lives when you pray for them. That's the starting point. It's starting point for two reasons. First, it will increase your love for them. When you continually lift up your neighbors and their needs, they get more of your heart. Moreover, if you pray for them and their needs and they learn about it, they know they have a friend. Second, you'll never help them understand God's love unless something happens to their spirit. Until their hearts are ready, your talk of Christ or your talk of Bethany seems eccentric, foolish, or even manipulative. This is important because as Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 2, people without the Spirit do not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God. They are unable to because it takes the Spirit's work to help them understand. In his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul said that the god of this age blinds unbelievers so they can't see the truth of the gospel. Jesus said that no one can come to him unless the Father draws him. But in answer to prayer, God changes circumstances and eventually hearts. I believe that when you intercede or pray for people, you are part of God's drawing work. You wouldn't have the relationship or the heart to pray for them if God weren't at work on their behalf. Intercede! Get to know your neighbors and pray for their hurts, concerns and needs. Also, pray with them when you have opportunity.

To evangelize, first intercede. Second, initiate. Jesus initiated the relationship with the Samaritan woman. God initiated his relationship with humanity, and Christ commissioned us to go to people. Don't wait for them to come to you. Get involved in your neighbors lives. Make them a part of your daily or weekly agenda.

Intercede, initiate and finally, integrate. Integrate or bring together on behalf of your neighbors your identity, gifts, personality, passions and friends. Accept your identity as God's priest sent to them. Pray for them and pray with them. Use your gifts that can be helpful to them. Be a mechanic, a cook, a listener, a computer geek, a host or whatever. Let God use your personality, hobbies and passions to bless your neighbors. Have

believing friends join you in praying and serving your neighbors. Integrate. Bring these together in their behalf.

Some churches are touching lives through card parties, block parties, golf outings, fishing expeditions, volley ball and bowling teams. They do all of this for love of their unbelieving neighbors. In themselves, these things don't do that much for people. But when they are used to build friendships that bless and bring good news, they make such a difference. Like the Samaritan woman, at the right time, neighbors receive attention, answers and affirmation that opens their eyes to God's personal love and power for them.

Do you realize that you are God's partner in evangelizing your neighbor? Do you know that God plans for you to make a difference? Love your neighbor. Begin praying for them, and soon what God does through you will become your food.