

A Fresh Approach To Witness For The 21st Century: A Global Perspective

Author: Rebecca Manley Pippert & Bishop Benjamin A. Kwashi

Date: 09.07.2010

Category: Personal Witness

Editor's Note: This Cape Town 2010 Advance Paper has been written by Rebecca Manley Pippert and Bishop Benjamin A. Kwashi as an overview of the topic to be discussed at the Multiplex session on "A Fresh Approach to Witness for the 21st Century: A Global Perspective." Responses to this paper through the Lausanne Global Conversation will be fed back to the authors and others to help shape their final presentations at the Congress.

The gospel is the Good News, the glorious news that God through Christ came to our planet, lived, died and rose again to take away the sin of the world. And he offers to live his dynamic life in and through us as we place our faith in him—;not on the basis of our merit but as a gift of sheer unmerited grace. It's the greatest news ever to grace our planet!

With such great news, why do so many feel inadequate when it comes to sharing their faith? Why does the church struggle in training believers to share confidently the glorious gospel? The relevance of the opening line of Rebecca's book *Out of the Salt Shaker* remains the same, even after 30 years: Christians and non-Christians have something in common: we're both uptight about evangelism.

However, while the Western church has been struggling, there has been a phenomenal explosion of growth in the global South. On any given Sunday there are more Anglicans attending church in Kenya, South Africa, Tanzania or Uganda than in Britain and America combined. Christianity's center of gravity has moved decisively south. Yet without diminishing the joy of such remarkable growth, astute voices in the Global South express concern over what is the gospel that is being preached? Is it orthodoxy or is it sometimes a "prosperity" version?

The West reveals a different story. In terms of church growth less than 2% of Europeans call themselves Evangelical Christians; less than 5% in Australia attend church, and even in the "Bible Belt" of America fewer than half the people go to church. In short, the Western world is now considered a mission field.

Equally challenging is how to motivate those in the pews each Sunday. How do we encourage the "unfaithful faithful" to share the Good News of Jesus? How can we equip our churches to become inwardly strong yet outwardly focused with people who are ablaze with the love of Jesus? That is part of the Western challenge.

As Christians, and as the church of Jesus Christ, we are called by our Lord to "Go and make disciples." The call to bear witness is part of God's plan to bring the Kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven. Yet many of the evangelistic "magic bullets" that worked in the past are now not as effective, particularly in the West.

Is there a way to approach evangelism that is biblically sound yet culturally relevant? Are there principles we can glean from Scripture that are effective in the skeptical, post-Enlightenment Western culture as well as for the Global South? Never have we needed greater clarity over how to fulfill Christ's command to "Go and make disciples."

Through the years of doing evangelism training worldwide, we are more convinced than ever that we must develop a biblically based, theologically sound and relationally effective approach if we are to bear witness effectively to Christ. Our emphasis must not be numbers or techniques, but authenticity, credibility and spiritual power. Enabling the church to know Christ well, and to make Him well known—;that is our global challenge.

But the issues we face in communicating "the best news ever" in the 21st century are wide and deep.

What are some of the challenges we face in developing a holistic understanding of evangelism for 21 Century?

Getting the Story StraightWhat is the essence of this gospel that has been “handed down” to us? How do we discern what is true and essential from the nonessential and even heretical? With the crisis of truth so prevalent in the West, where there are disagreements amongst the faithful over how to interpret key theological doctrines, the real issue comes down to this: how can we know what is true and what is biblical?This crisis of truth is not only a problem in the West. There have been serious and dangerous distortions of the Gospel in the various forms of the “prosperity” or “health and wealth” gospels that are exported from the USA to parts of the Global South.

Getting the Story OutDo we have a universal model for how to obey Christ’s command to “Go and make disciples?” Are there models for communicating the gospel that honor our cultural differences without compromising biblical fidelity? How do we find ways to be culturally relevant without succumbing to the consumer culture of the West, where often the “latest is greatest?” While we welcome the return of evangelical passion for social justice, evangelism (in secular media and the world’s perception) is now counter-intuitive and politically incorrect. Has social justice, while terribly important, become for many Western Christians the easy default attitude, so that evangelism will have to be relearned as a choice and a sacrificial commitment? What is the role of justice and justification when it comes to sharing the Good News?

Taking the Story InHow can the church be renewed internally by the Holy Spirit in order to become recognizable as “the spontaneous overflow of a community of praise?the radiance of a supernatural reality?a place of joy, of praise ? of surprises, and of laughter - a place where there is a foretaste of the endless surprises of Heaven?” (1)How can we help grow churches and conduct outreaches while recognizing that it is not human brilliance and skill that transform lives but the power of God?

The Role of Culture

There is much discussion today about the role of culture and the importance of expressing the gospel in culturally relevant ways. First we must recognize that there is no such thing as a Christian culture or civilization. All cultures have virtues and faults. The good news is that God made people of every culture in His image.

Nevertheless, the more we understand the issues and questions that arise in each culture, the more effective we will be in arousing their interest in the gospel. Consider just a few examples from our experiences of doing evangelism training around the world:

Malaysia: Unlike the West where we must argue for the possibility of the existence of God, Malaysia is a diverse, multi-religious, multi-cultural country where so many faiths exist simultaneously that people more readily accept God’s existence. Therefore the challenge is not: Does God exist? But rather: Which God should we believe in?

The issue: How do we communicate the absolute uniqueness of Christ in a country where there are many faiths, or as in India, where there are literally thousands of gods and goddesses to worship?

China: Like most traditional cultures where families are the glue of society, honoring parents is of supreme importance and to bring shame to one’s family is considered the worst possible offense. In such a cultural context, a challenge frequently heard by new converts is: How could you dishonor your family by believing in a different tradition from how you’ve been raised? Why do you believe in a western God?

The issue: How do we respectfully share our faith when our family is of another faith and where there is deep misunderstanding and prejudice concerning Christianity?

Sabah: After giving an Outreach Event in Sabah on the island of Borneo, a woman from a Taoist

background with anxiety etched on her face asked Becky: "But I am the eldest adult child and if I give my life to Christ then who would light the joss sticks for my ancestors [prayers of protection for the dead against evil spirits]?"

The issue: How do we honor our parents yet live out our faith with integrity when we can no longer follow their religious traditions?

Belfast: Major cities in Northern Ireland were nearly destroyed by the intense sectarian violence during the 1960's -1990's between the political factions that favored staying part of the U.K. (mainly Protestants), versus those who called for a separate united Ireland (mainly Catholics). An interested skeptic speaking to Becky about the Person of Jesus suddenly said, "Oh Becky, let's not get bogged down in a discussion on politics!"

The issue: How do we bear witness to Christ in a country that doesn't trust words alone because of the great suffering and damage that was caused by wars ? wars they perceive as being religiously motivated? How do we help people separate true Christianity from the terrible atrocities that have been done in the name of religion?

Sweden: Sweden is considered one of the most secular and postmodern countries in Europe. A Christian took his skeptic friend to a debate on campus between an atheist and a Christian. The Christian won the argument with a spirit of graciousness. But the skeptic student said, in what has to be the ultimate postmodern response ever recorded: "I'm offended to think someone would try to defeat another person merely on the basis of rational argument."

The issue: How do we present Christ to someone who finds the claims of truth offensive? Whose belief in tolerance makes the exclusive claims of Christ seem outrageous and arrogant?

Denmark: Danes think of themselves as secular unbelievers, who only by tradition are members of the state Lutheran Church. Yet in recent years there has been a surprising openness and hunger for spiritual realities in the young, which is causing them to turn to alternative approaches. Why alternative? Because so many Danes have been baptized and confirmed in the state Church without ever understanding true faith.

The issue: How do we present Christ in a state-church culture that has almost inoculated them from understanding Christian reality ? yet the problem is that they think they do understand!

Australia: In a secular country where church attendance is less than 5% and where the drive for materialism is rampant, a skeptic from Sydney said, "But why should I consider Christ when my life is fine as it is? Furthermore, if I gave my life to Christ I might have to give my money to the church and there's no way I'm doing that!"

The issue: how do we break through apathy and the quest for materialism that can temporarily block the need for spiritual realities?

Clearly to be effective in witness we must be aware of the issues that arise in that particular culture. Nevertheless we must also consider that Peter at Pentecost was able to preach the gospel to seemingly every language and culture. Yet his message was understood. Why? Because God's Word was declared through the power of God's Spirit and therefore transcended all of their cultural differences. That is our tension: being culturally sensitive while leaning on the power of God's Word and Spirit.

Our Theology must impact our Methodology

There has been a tendency in the West to focus evangelism training on simply learning techniques. But techniques do not motivate us at a deeper level. Nor are they effective in building authentic relationships. This isn't to diminish the importance of offering practical help. But the practical must be

framed within a deeper theological understanding. Our effectiveness in witness does not come from learning new methods but from understanding the message. Our freedom to witness comes from understanding the author of the message, God Himself! In other words, our theology must impact our methodology. Understanding the character of God will be the deepest motivation possible for witness. Knowing Christ well drives us to want to make Him well known.

The Crisis of Truth and the proclamation of the Gospel

How do we in the West faithfully, creatively proclaim the gospel in our age of relativity that denies the possibility of absolute truth ? when the truth of any truth is under suspicion and the validity of gospel truth is either denied or ignored? Yet we are told: "By this Gospel you are saved, that Christ died for our sins, according to the Scriptures, that he was buried that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, that he appeared to Peter and then to the Twelve." (1 Cor. 15: 2-5) As Peter Kuzmic writes, "The faithful, brave and creative proclamation of the gospel must be grounded in these foundational facts of the universally valid truth, for truth is foundation for trust." (2) Stephen Neill states: "The only reason for being a Christian is the overpowering conviction that the Christian faith is true." (3)

If we are not faithful to the gospel then the work of evangelism will never be effective. But when Christians feel intimidated about telling others the Christian message, it is not just a fear of rejection. It goes deeper, to the ability to believe the message themselves in a world that tells them that a religious conviction cannot be true in any factual sense and must be held only as a private opinion. Our task is to strengthen the modern believer's confidence that this "Good News" is not just true for them, but it is true for the whole world and can be told with assurance.

These are a few of the issues that face us when considering evangelism in the 21st century. A proper response to all these issues is far beyond the scope of this introductory essay. Our core focus at the Lausanne Congress in Cape Town (in the Multiplex and Dialogue Sessions) will be to address how best to communicate faith in the 21st century in three areas: personal evangelism, small group evangelism and proclamation evangelism.

Three Pronged Response to Evangelism in the global era

The strongest and most vital evangelism occurs when three approaches are used together: personal evangelism, small group evangelism and proclamation evangelistic events. These three approaches complement each other. Most Christian organizations settle for only one approach and it is inadequate. When we use all three together ? when the church provides solid training in personal and small group witness as well as doing Outreach events ? the result is powerful! Our focus, then, is in developing an effective 3-prong strategy which equips believers with a personal, incarnational approach to witness, that offers small group evangelism through Seeker Bible studies and that effectively offers proclamation evangelism.

I. Personal Evangelism

When training others to develop confidence and competence in the area of personal witness, here are some areas that need to be addressed:

Our Model

Do we have a universal model for how to obey Christ's command to "Go and make disciples of all the nations?" We do! Christ gave us a model, a message and a method for reaching the world. Our model for outreach, our paradigm for evangelism is the doctrine of the Incarnation. Although there are many doctrines which shape our understanding of witness, perhaps none shape it more than the doctrine of the incarnation; for it is not only a fundamental doctrine, it is a theological prism through which we view our entire missional task in the world.

Jesus said "As the Father sent me into the world, so I send you." Jesus is telling us that our mission to the world is to resemble His. Just as He entered our world, so are we to enter other people's worlds as He did.

How then do we go into the world like Jesus? Jesus was both radically identified in love and yet radically different in holiness. What skills can we learn by exploring the implications of the Incarnation? Jesus developed authentic, loving relationships with seekers. He had a "go-to-them" not a "come-to-us" approach. Through observing Jesus we see that establishing loving relationships with seekers reflects the Trinitarian nature of God. God is a relational God. For most seekers today the gap from unbelief to belief cannot be closed outside the context of relationship. Jesus reveals the importance of arousing curiosity in the seeker BEFORE we share the Good News. Closely related to this is learning how to raise the topic of faith. How do we go from a natural conversation to a spiritual one without sounding artificial or manipulative? Jesus has much to teach us about the art of conversation: how to listen respectfully and to dialogue, how to ask good questions and handle their questions, how to use everyday language and adapt what we say to the situation of the person. What do we do with our sense of inadequacy? How do we overcome our fears? What can we learn from Jesus and the stories in the New Testament to assure us that our sense of inadequacy is the first qualification to being a witness?!

Our Message

What are the skills we need to communicate the Gospel? Learn to tell His Story Learn to tell Our Story Learn to communicate the gospel in a contextually sensitive way

The basic content of the gospel is always recognizable and unchanging because it was received by the revelation of Jesus Christ (Gal 1: 11-12). However, the New Testament evangelists demonstrate flexibility and creativity in adapting and communicating the gospel in different political and cultural settings. As the German theologian Helmut Thielicke reminds us, "the Gospel must be preached afresh and told in new ways to every generation, since every generation has its own unique questions. This is why the Gospel must be constantly forwarded to a new address because the recipient is repeatedly changing his place of residence." (4)

Our Means

The lack of dependence on the Spirit's power is perhaps the single most glaring deficiency in the modern Western church compared to the Early Church. Jesus told his first century disciples they needed to wait for the Holy Spirit before evangelizing their world. "It's critical for us, if we're going to evangelize the world in the 21st century, that we have the power of the Holy Spirit residing in us, flowing through us, bringing the character of Jesus in us," a Christian recently told CBN News. Evangelism isn't simply a communication or content skill ? it's a spiritual activity dependent upon the supernatural power of God. Therefore we must rediscover that prayer is a holy weapon to be used in evangelism and in our spiritual battles. We must ask God to empower us with the gifts of the Spirit that strengthen us in evangelism. We don't simply impart information when we share the gospel. We need the Spirit's power to give our words meaning and effectiveness. It's the Spirit of God that produces transformed lives, not our ability to communicate the gospel perfectly. We must be convinced that there is no greater power in the world than the power of the Holy Spirit who goes before us, who speaks through us.

II. SmallId/langs/en.js" type="text/javascript"> Group Evangelism

What do we do after we've had several good conversations about faith with a seeker? What should we do next? What we need is a tool that enables seekers to feel comfortable and safe, that embodies a style that is Socratic, dialogical and process oriented, while allowing them to confront the Person of Jesus.

One of the most effective evangelism tools is the Seeker Bible study. A Seeker Study examines the

life of Jesus through a gospel in which the majority of the participants in the small group are unbelievers. The Christian asks questions from the Seeker Bible study guide and invites the seekers to discover the Person of Jesus for themselves. The Christian is not the authority ? the biblical text is the teacher.

We invite the skeptic or seeker to come to a neutral place (our home, our school dorm, at the back of a restaurant) to look at a gospel and decide for themselves who they think Jesus is. We tell them they don't have to believe in God or believe the Bible is the Word of God. We simply invite them to "come and see." The atmosphere is casual and relaxed. They are meant to have fun and feel free to ask questions as they investigate the life of Jesus.

It's effective because those who wouldn't darken the door of a church feel comfortable coming to our home where there are fellow seekers or skeptics. And while some may have been turned off by religious organizations like the church, many are still curious about Jesus: who was he? What was he like? What did he say and do? It's also effective because the power of God's Word and the power of the Holy Spirit are working on our behalf! And Jesus begins to come alive!

Having done Seeker Studies for over 30 years and having trained Christians around the world to use this tool, we have seen incredible fruit as a result.

III. Proclamation Evangelism

A powerful way to evangelize is communicating the gospel through Proclamation Outreach. The African church has remarkable gifts of evangelism and Africa has seen tremendous response to Proclamation Evangelism events. Bishop Ben Kwashi of Nigeria, a gifted and effective evangelist, has seen scores of people come to Christ. He has much to say in this area about the power of the gospel: Have confidence in the Gospel: In the world today there is much suffering, darkness, evil and death. The one and only power that can overcome this and transform individuals, communities and nations is the power of the gospel. The gospel is not a static, established tradition but a living powerful force with the ability to transform in ways which even pass the hopes and expectations of those who carry and plant the initial seed. It is the Gospel that has brought life, light and hope to darkness, for this world and for the next. We therefore must not compromise or trade this gospel for anything at all ? not even for our physical lives. Never forget that the gospel, as Paul writes in Roman 1:16-17, is the power of God! Have confidence in power of the Holy Spirit: The gospel has an explosive power, which is demonstrated by the resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is not a passive entity. The gospel is a creative power, endowed with the creating Spirit of the One who is the creator of the universe. When faced with sin, hell and Satan, the gospel is also a destroying power, deadly, unconquerable and uncompromising. The gospel seeks approval from nobody, bribes no authority and makes no apology for its coming. So follow Paul's advice and do not be ashamed of the gospel! Ask God to fill you afresh with the power of His Spirit as you preach! The Gospel is for everyone: The gospel is universal. It is for the salvation of everyone who believes, no matter where they come from or who they are. It is people, not money, that are the target of the gospel, the main asset of the gospel, and the carriers of the gospel. It is the saving power of this universal gospel that brings radical change ? change from death to live, from hell to heaven, from darkness to light.

People of God, let us sharpen our focus on this one goal, the task of making Christ known, getting people to live righteously, to live holy lives, and to put all their energies, all their efforts into the mission of God in evangelizing the world.

Effective Witness for such a time as this

Let us go forth then remembering that evangelism is a life before it is a task; it is a question of being before it becomes an agenda of doing. Let us refuse to preach a gospel that promises so much and demands so little. We are on dangerous ground when we allow techniques to take precedence over theology, when human strategy replaces trust in God's Word and when we rely on programs to replace reliance on the power of the Holy Spirit. We have been given an infinitely credible gospel ?

so let us be credible messengers who demonstrate not clever methodology but authenticity. Remember, evangelism is not the result of perfected techniques given by super sales people, because the gospel is not for sale!

If the world is to be evangelized in our 21st century ? if we are to see revival ? it will take genuine repentance within the church, divine cleansing, holy living and a fresh empowerment by the Holy Spirit. What we need is a renewed vision of who Christ is and what He has come to do: to heal, restore and transform all of life! If we live out this vision as true disciples, then evangelism cannot help but happen!

© The Lausanne Movement 2010 Newbigin, Lesslie, 1986: Foolishness to the Greeks, p.149 (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing CO).Kuzmic, Peter, 1980: "Evangelical Witness to Eastern Europe", in Serving Our Generations: Evangelical Strategies for the Eighties (Waldron Scott, ed: Colorado Springs: World EVangelical Fellowship, pp.77-85.Neill, Stephen Charles, 1970: Call to Mission, p.10 (Philadelphia; Fortress Press).Quoted from How to Teach the Truth of the Gospel, Peter Kuzmic, p.198. (J.D. Douglas, ed. Proclaim Christ Until He Comes. (Lausanne II in Manila. Minneapolis; Worldwide Publications, 1986).