



Sharing the Gospel with Ease

How the Love of Christ
Can Flow Naturally
from Your Life

THOM S. RAINER

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Sharing the Gospel with Ease: How the Love of Christ Can Flow Naturally from Your Life

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THE MOST IMPORTANT MESSAGE

The small town in Alabama where I was born and raised—population 3,700—had a disproportionate number of churches for its size. The churches represented multiple denominations, and a few had no attachment at all.

I knew of two Jewish families in town, but most of the rest, I think, would have identified themselves as Christians, though many were likely Christians in name only. My point is simply that there were plenty of Christians in my hometown who could have told me about Jesus. Maybe some did and I just don't remember, but I cannot recall ever having a gospel conversation with anyone.

Well, to be completely honest, there was one fiery young man from an independent church who told me on a few

occasions that I was going to hell. But I don't remember him ever telling me how to get to heaven. But it might not have mattered. His caustic and superior attitude was an immediate turnoff, and I really had no desire to listen to him.

Most members of the denominational churches in town didn't talk much about Jesus. Obviously, I can't speak for every last one, but I can say that none of them ever shared the gospel with me.

Then Joe Hendrickson came to town.

Joe was the new varsity football coach at my high school, and he had a tough row to hoe. He was replacing a longtime coach who was greatly revered. Expectations were high.

To be honest, football was more of a religion than Christianity in that town, and there were two denominations: Alabama fans and Auburn fans. The definition of a mixed marriage was an Alabama fan marrying an Auburn fan. Many people wouldn't cross that line. One spouse would have to convert to the other side for the marriage to have a chance.

High school football was always in the shadow of the college game, but it was still important. It was very important. Joe Hendrickson inherited that rabid football environment when he came to town.

From the get-go, Coach Joe was in a no-win situation. The talent level had fallen off at our school, and most of the players and town residents still loved the former coach who

had moved on. Coach Joe lasted two years in our town, and both years were extremely difficult for him. But those two years changed my life.

Though I hesitate to include this next part, I think it's important to mention another major factor in Coach Joe's story. This was in the late 1960s in the South, and integration had begun. African Americans, who comprised a majority of the population in our town, were slowly being added to formerly all-white schools. Racism was rampant.

A few African Americans at my school joined the football team, much to the chagrin of many families and players. But Coach Joe treated them like any other player. They got the same consideration, the same opportunities, and the same level of coaching as anyone else. It did not go over well with many of the townspeople.

I think it's important for you to know these dynamics because they form the backdrop for my experience with Coach Joe. In the eyes of the community, he had several strikes against him: He was new, he wasn't the former coach, and he treated everyone equally. And for that he felt the wrath of many people in town.

But Coach Joe did not let circumstances hinder his demonstrable love for Jesus Christ. What I remember about Joe Hendrickson is how his Christian faith just seemed natural. It was a part of who he was and it shone through in everything he did. I also remember how he willingly and eagerly

shared about Christ with anyone who was willing to listen, including his football players.

I know because I was one of them.

To the best of my recollection, he called me into his small office one day after practice. I had no idea what he wanted. I feared I had messed up a play. But Coach Joe didn't want to talk football; he wanted to talk about Jesus. I'm sure there was a bit of small talk, but I don't remember that part. I just remember that he clearly presented the gospel.

He shared Bible verses with me that demonstrated that we are all sinners in need of forgiveness. He spoke powerfully about how God sent his Son to take the punishment for our sins through his death on the cross. He told me how Jesus defeated death through his resurrection.

And then he told me that Christ was offering me salvation and eternity as a free gift. He wanted to accept me just as I was. I could not earn salvation, but I could receive it.

Later that night, I repented of my sins and by faith accepted what God had done for me through Jesus Christ.

I became a Christian.

It has now been more than fifty years since that life-changing conversation. And however God has used me during those five decades, it all began with a gospel witness by an ordinary man, a high school football coach, who faithfully told me the Good News about Jesus Christ. God used Joe Hendrickson to set my eternal destiny to heaven.

What was so remarkable about Coach Joe was that he shared the gospel with such ease. And though I have since learned several different approaches to evangelism, I still remember how Coach Joe did it. He wasn't self-conscious and he wasn't trying to sell me anything. Our conversation was as natural for him as talking about a football play. Though it has become something of a cliché in Christian circles, Coach Joe really did speak from an overflowing love for Jesus Christ. Without a doubt, his joy and confidence in Jesus were clearly evident.

WHERE HAS EVANGELISM GONE?

Let's try not to complicate evangelism. At its core, it's very simple. Evangelism is sharing the Good News about Jesus Christ.

Two oft-quoted passages about evangelism—Matthew 28:18-20 and Acts 1:8—comprise what is typically called the Great Commission. Both passages capture some of the last words Jesus spoke on earth.

Matthew 28:18-20 tells us that “Jesus came and told his disciples, ‘I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth. Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Teach these new disciples to obey all the

commands I have given you. And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”

Verse 18 is often omitted when this Great Commission passage is quoted, but it shouldn't be. It reminds us that we share the gospel under the authority of and in the power of Jesus Christ. Evangelism is not a human-centered effort.

In verse 19, where it says “go and make disciples,” the verb *go* literally means “*as you are going*.” In other words, we are to share the good news of Christ as we go through life—in every situation. As we go to the grocery store. As we go to the workplace. As we go around our neighborhood. You get the picture. We are to go with intentionality to people who are not yet believers in Jesus and tell them the Good News.

The point of sharing the gospel is to help people begin a *new life* as followers of Jesus. New Christians are to be baptized. New Christians are to be taught what it means to follow Jesus as Lord and Savior. And let's not miss the important last sentence in Matthew 28:20, which assures us that Jesus will always be with us.

In Acts 1:8, the other common Great Commission passage, Jesus is about to ascend to heaven. But right before he goes, he leaves his followers with this charge: “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. And you will be my witnesses, telling people about me everywhere—in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

Once again, Jesus gives us a command that begins with a promise: The power of the Holy Spirit will be with us as we share the Good News. Again we are reminded that evangelism is not a human-centered or human-powered endeavor. It is the power of God working through us by the Holy Spirit. We are also reminded that evangelism is done with intentionality. We are to first share the Good News in our immediate surroundings, our “Jerusalem.” But we are also to go beyond our immediate context and share the gospel wherever and whenever the opportunity arises.

So how is this endeavor going for Christians today?

Let me speak about my own context: North American congregations. In one study by our Church Answers team, we found that only one person would be reached with the gospel each year for every nineteen members in average weekly attendance. If you consider that most North American churches have only about half their total membership in attendance on any given Sunday, we can deduce that only one person per year will become a Christian for every thirty-eight members in a congregation.

If you find those numbers boring or confusing, let’s simply focus on the central issue: *Most church members never share their faith.*

Jesus spoke of this reality to his disciples: “When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them because they were confused and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. He

said to his disciples, “The harvest is great, but the workers are few. So pray to the Lord who is in charge of the harvest; ask him to send more workers into his fields” (Matthew 9:36-38).

Did you get that? Jesus is talking about evangelism. He is talking about the great opportunity to reach people. “The harvest is great,” he says. But what’s missing? *Workers*. People who are willing to share their faith. Jesus tells us to pray that God will send more workers. The opportunities are there, but too few Christians are willing to go into the harvest fields.

Such is the reality we find in many churches today. The communities where these churches are located offer many opportunities to share the gospel. But evangelism is not considered a priority.

I have personally conducted several hundred church consultations over the past few decades. Our Church Answers team has been involved in a few thousand consultations. The most common question I receive is this: *Why is our church not growing?* My typical response is that their church is not reaching people for Christ.

The next question they ask is also a common one: *Why aren't we reaching people for Christ?* Again the answer is just as simple: Because you aren't *trying* to reach people for Christ.

It's a sobering reality: Most North American churches are not evangelistic. And the churches are not evangelistic because their members are not evangelistic.

Yes, it is that simple—and that tragic.

The harvest is great, but the workers are few.

The message of forgiveness, the free gift of salvation, is the most important message in the world. And yet, as the church, we are speechless.

We have countless conversations every day. We utter thousands of words every day. We love to talk about our families. We often talk with great enthusiasm about our sports teams. We talk about the weather with both curiosity and concern. Yet we often feel our hearts racing with fear at the thought of mentioning the name of Jesus.

It's just not a natural conversation for most people. Silence is much more comfortable.

Why are we so uneasy? We will unpack that question in the next chapter. For now, it's important to understand that our silence plays into the hands of the enemy. Our silence is Satan's goal. He loves our hesitation, our self-consciousness, and our unwillingness to share the gospel. His goal is to increase the population of hell. Every gospel conversation is a threat to his dominion. This is spiritual warfare at its most basic level.

EVANGELISM AS SPIRITUAL WARFARE

“Resist the enemy.”

Those words were written by the apostle Paul to the church at Ephesus. And though he doesn't mention evangelism by

name in this passage, he pulls back the curtain to show us the true battlefield in the struggle to win human hearts for the Lord. Look at Ephesians 6:10-13:

A final word: Be strong in the Lord and his mighty power. Put on all of God's armor so that you will be able to stand firm against all strategies of the devil. For we are not fighting against flesh-and-blood enemies, but against evil rulers and authorities of the unseen world, against mighty powers in this dark world, and against evil spirits in the heavenly places.

Therefore, put on every piece of God's armor so you will be able to resist the enemy in the time of evil. Then after the battle you will still be standing firm.

Our enemy is evil. He has strategies to oppose us. His power is mighty in a dark world.

The challenge might seem too great were it not for the powerful admonition at the beginning of the passage: *Be strong in the Lord and his mighty power*. We have the Lord on our side, along with his all-surpassing power. In him we can stand strong in the face of the enemy.

When we are witnesses for Christ, we have the power of God behind us and the full armor of God to protect us. But

when we are silent, none of that matters. If we *don't* share the gospel, if we come up with convenient excuses not to evangelize, we're simply giving Satan his way. Satan wants us to keep quiet. He is very comfortable with silent, self-absorbed churches.

Look at Ephesians 6:14-15: "Stand your ground, putting on the belt of truth and the body armor of God's righteousness. For shoes, put on the peace that comes from the Good News so that you will be fully prepared."

Did you get that? We have peace in the battle because we have the Good News. We can be fully prepared because we have the gospel. And because we have the gospel, we have the authority and the mandate to share the gospel.

Evangelism is the enemy of the devil. Evangelism is a God-given, Spirit-empowered mandate to share the gospel of Jesus. Those who hear and gladly receive the gospel message become citizens of heaven. They depopulate hell.

Evangelism is indeed spiritual warfare. It is the greatest threat to Satan and his dominion.

By the way, Paul wrote these words about spiritual warfare at the end of his letter to the church at Ephesus, right before his final greetings. He wanted them to be the last thing the church members heard when the letter was read to the church.

If this message was vitally important to the church in the first century, it is no less important in our day.

EVERY CHRISTIAN'S RESPONSIBILITY

My first year as a pastor, many years ago, was spent in a church founded in the late 1700s that had dwindled to seven members in attendance. I know beyond a shadow of a doubt that the only reason they called me as pastor was that I was the only candidate they had. If you had heard me preach, you would understand.

The first few months were a typical honeymoon phase. The church members loved me and showed it. I loved them as well. We had a nice period of growth as people in the community began to discover that the once-dead rural church had a bit of new life. We even saw some people become followers of Jesus, something that hadn't happened in that church in more than twenty-five years. The early stages of ministry there were really fun.

But the honeymoon phase always comes to an end, and this church was no exception. There was no big controversy. The critics were only mildly vocal. But the season of unity and laughter had waned. Its decline was noticeable and troubling.

As you might imagine, we entered another drought of seeing people come to Christ. The excitement of the early days turned to apathy. Old patterns of neglect, silence, and frustration reemerged—slowly but with certainty.

I once told my wife that I wanted to write a book on

mistakes I'd made as a pastor. Without missing a beat, she deadpanned her response: "It would have to be a multi-volume series." Well, I made one of those many mistakes early in my time at this first church. I used the Lord's pulpit as a bully pulpit for my own frustrations.

I don't recall the biblical text I used for this particular sermon, but in truth it didn't matter. I wasn't interested in explaining God's Word to the people. I wanted to fuss at them. I wanted to point out their inadequacies.

So I did.

I know I said a lot of negative things that morning, but the one specific point that stands out in my memory was telling the members they were sending people to hell because of their disobedience and silence.

I felt terrible after that message. Even if some of what I said was true, my heart was in the wrong place. I spoke out of anger and spite. It's no wonder I felt awful.

Not long after I gave that sermon, God convicted me of two major issues of sin in my life.

First, I had used the sacred time of preaching the Word to vent my own anger and frustration—wielding my sermon as a weapon rather than offering it as God's tool.

Second, I was convicted of my own spiritual inconsistency—my own lack of time in the Bible and in prayer and my own silence in evangelism.

I had preached harshly to my congregation about

evangelism when I wasn't even doing it myself. I shouted a message, but I wasn't living that message.

Evangelism is every Christian's responsibility, and it is certainly the responsibility of those who would lead God's people.

Don't get me wrong: If you're a church member and you're expecting your pastor and staff to do all the evangelism, your thinking is just as wrong as mine was when I berated my congregation for not doing more. Evangelism is not something to delegate. And it's not something to hire out. According to Paul in Ephesians 4:12, it is the responsibility of those gifted as apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastors and teachers to "equip God's people to do his work and build up the church, the body of Christ." But it is everyone's responsibility to *do* the ministry, to pursue the Great Commission, to spread the Good News.

SHARING THE MESSAGE WITH EASE

Think about an incredibly joyous event in your life. Perhaps something as basic as your team winning a championship. Do you remember how you couldn't wait to talk about it? Do you remember your excitement and enthusiasm? You were willing and eager to have a conversation about your team with anyone who would listen.

I remember when I found out Nellie Jo was pregnant

with our first child. I had to tell someone. There was no internet in those days, but I couldn't wait to get on the phone and spread the news. If you're of a certain age, as I am, you remember how expensive long-distance calls were in those days. I didn't care. I had to tell people. I had to tell a *lot* of people.

My excitement was renewed with the same intensity for each of Nellie Jo's pregnancies and the births of all three sons. A couple of decades later, I felt a new excitement and eagerness to tell others about the arrival of each of my grandchildren.

The point is simple. When we are truly excited about something, we have to share it. We're not deterred by obstacles or worried about how we might come across. We just have to get the news out there.

So why is it that most Christians don't share the gospel? Why do we remain silent about the greatest thing that has ever happened to us? Why are we reticent about sharing the best piece of news other people will ever hear? At its most basic level, it's a matter of spiritual warfare. If we can be duped into believing that a comfortable and silent Christianity is okay, Satan wins the battle. He'd like nothing better than a mute church.

The following story may be fictitious, but I like it nonetheless. And it wouldn't surprise me if this had actually happened in some church at some point.

The setting is a business meeting in a church with congregational polity. You know the type. Members vote on all kinds of trivial matters but never talk about things that really matter.

In this particular church, the moderator of the meeting was a stickler for *Robert's Rules of Order*. No member ever challenged him because he had the most recent edition of *Robert's* memorized. The meeting had been contentious from the start, with a bitter debate over what color they should paint the fellowship hall.

When it came time for new business, an elderly gentleman asked to speak. He wanted to tell the congregation how he had shared the gospel with a teenager, and how that teenager had accepted Christ almost immediately. The church members were stunned into silence. Nothing like this had ever happened in one of their business meetings. Even the usually composed moderator was a bit flustered.

"We are all grateful to hear this story," he finally said with feigned sincerity. "But we are at 'new business' on the agenda, so I will have to rule you out of order."

The elderly gentleman stood and addressed the moderator and the other members at the meeting.

"Sir," he said softly but firmly, "if sharing the gospel is not the business of the church, then I suggest it's time for this church to go out of business."

The thesis of this book is simple: We must all learn to

share the gospel with ease. But this isn't so much a how-to book on evangelism as it is a reminder that God has given us all we need to share the Good News about his Son, Jesus Christ.

Do we fail to share the gospel because we're afraid we lack the ability? Do we fail to share the gospel because we think it's someone else's responsibility? A good friend told me recently that he is hesitant to share the gospel because he isn't sure what to say. We will address that subject in a subsequent chapter.

Based on surveys we've taken, our best estimate is that fewer than one in twenty Christians have ever had a gospel conversation with someone. Some may have had a few such conversations, but they don't have a *lifestyle* of sharing the gospel. And very few, it seems, are able to share the gospel with ease.

It's time to get rid of our excuses and make evangelism one of the highest priorities in our lives and our churches. Let's not forget: When we evangelize, we do so in God's power. If he is our power, we cannot fail.

GOD'S GOT THIS

I love watching my three sons in their roles as dads. They are amazing fathers, so much better than I ever was. I love watching my grandchildren run to their dads when they are

afraid or have a perceived need. And I love watching my sons take care of them, protect them, and provide for them.

One evening, during a loud thunderstorm, my youngest son, Jess, embraced one of his children who had run to him in fear. He simply picked her up, held her tight, and whispered, “I’ve got you. It’s okay, I’ve got you.”

If only we would run into the embrace of our heavenly Father—with all the protection, power, and love he offers—we would never stumble in evangelism. We would never be fearful. We would share the gospel with ease.

Remember the promises we noted earlier in the two Great Commission passages:

Be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age.

MATTHEW 28:20

You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you.

ACTS 1:8

We are never commanded to share the gospel in our own strength or our own power. To the contrary, God always promises his power, his strength, and his presence.

Several years ago, we introduced a resource at Church Answers called Pray & Go (PrayAndGoChurch.com). The

concept is simple. Two church members walk together through a neighborhood and pray for each home they pass. They don't make direct contact with anyone, but they leave a door hanger letting the residents know that someone has prayed for them. The door hanger has the church's address along with a phone number and email address for texting or emailing prayer requests. That's it.

We have been blown away by the responses from churches. Their members aren't knocking on doors or presenting the gospel to anyone directly. They are simply praying for the residents of each home. But the results have been encouraging.

Here's what one pastor said when some of his members used Pray & Go in their community.

"We had a goal to pray for two thousand homes in three months," he began. "We surpassed that number by more than a thousand homes. The church members really caught the vision."

Even the pastor was surprised with the evangelistic fruit of these efforts.

"We had so many members tell us about unexpected encounters with unbelievers," he said. "People would come up to them and ask them what they were doing. Many times people would get saved in a conversation on the sidewalk. It was incredible."

The pastor estimated that about twenty people have

become followers of Christ through this low-pressure, non-confrontational approach. He anticipates there will be many more, based on the number of homes where the members prayed.

“I get a lot of people wanting to know what our ‘secret’ is,” he chuckled. “I tell them to simply get their people *praying* and *going*. It’s a powerful combination that God honors. Our church members have learned that prayer-filled going gives them the opportunity to share the gospel with ease. They depend on God; they don’t depend on themselves.”

We will look more closely in another chapter at the power of prayer and evangelism. But for now, be encouraged by this simple assurance: God’s got this.

COMMITTING TO BE A BEARER OF THE MOST IMPORTANT MESSAGE

God put this book in your hands for a reason. He wants it to remind you that you are responsible for conveying the most important message he has for the world. You are responsible for telling people the Good News of Jesus Christ. You are responsible for seeking God’s power and strength through prayer.

I began this chapter by talking about Joe Hendrickson. When I became a believer, I didn’t tell my parents at first. They didn’t know that Coach Joe had witnessed to me. I’m not certain why I didn’t share it with them, but I didn’t.

Many years later, when I began writing books, I mentioned Coach Joe in the acknowledgments of one of my early publications, *The Book of Church Growth*:

One final word. Some twenty-five years ago in Union Springs, Alabama, a high school football coach named Joe Hendrickson introduced me to the Savior whose church I write about in this book. I never thanked my coach for the eternal difference he made in my life, and I do not know where he is today. Perhaps somehow these words will find you, coach. Thank you for caring enough about one hungry little kid to tell him about the Bread of Life.¹

I sent a copy of the book to my mom. When she received it in the mail, she called me and she was crying. She told me she had never heard the story about Coach Joe, and she was so ashamed that she had not shared the gospel with me when I was growing up. Of course she had been a strong influence in my life and a model of right living, and I told her as much, but she kept rebuking herself for not explicitly telling me the Good News of Jesus Christ. She would mention that big regret until the day she died.

Eventually, years later, I was reconnected with Coach Joe. I had written about him so much that one of his neighbors, who had read my books, let him know I was looking for

him. He called the office at the organization I led at the time. Despite my precision in details, he wasn't certain the story was about him. He didn't remember the specific conversation with me.

When I heard his voice on the phone after so many years, I choked up. He did as well. Soon I was able to bring him to my company's headquarters, and we honored him and his family. He deserved that honor and so much more.

Coach Joe was God's instrument to introduce me to the Savior who would give me eternal life. He didn't just make all the difference in the world to me. He made all the difference in eternity.

Before you turn another page, before you read another word, will you commit to becoming a gospel bearer? Don't worry about the details. Don't worry about how doors will open. Just make a commitment to share the most important message ever.

It will make all the difference in the world . . . and eternity.