

Title: The 'Why' of Evangelism
Text: Various
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For the past six weeks we have been working our way through Paul's remarkable letter to the Ephesians. Paul spells out passionately both the rich inheritance God has provided us through Jesus and then how we should live in response to such a remarkable gift. It's been a great journey so far. But today we hit the pause button. In a while we will come back to and finish exploring the last three chapters of Ephesians, but today we jump into a new four-week series called Walk Across the Room as we investigate the why, how and where of evangelism, or sharing with others about our faith in Christ.

Before we jump in I think it is important to let you know why we would give so much teaching time to this topic.

First, evangelism is at the heart of Newlife's vision and values. Our vision is encapsulated by the phrase, 'changing lives, transforming the world.' We believe that God transforms our world one changed life at a time, and that a person's life is radically changed when they encounter the love and grace of Jesus Christ.

Our church has eight core values which describe the DNA or the fundamental identity of our church. At least two of those values are all about outreach and evangelism:

Inviting Hospitality

Offering hospitality and welcoming all out of God's reconciling love, we will always humbly and sacrificially open our lives to friends and strangers alike.

Passionate Outreach

Convicted that Jesus commands us to proclaim the gospel in word and deed to a world that is broken and hurting, we will live not to please ourselves, but to please God as we seek to reach the lost.

Over the next couple of months we are going to have some specific and deliberate opportunities for us to live out these values. We would love everyone to invite a friend, neighbour or relative who does not yet know Jesus to one of our morning's services on September 18 when Peter Pollock will be speaking. Peter, who is a South African cricketing legend, is an amazing clear and direct evangelist who has spoken at Newlife a couple of times before.

Two, even though evangelism is central to the mission of the church, often the church is not very good at it and individually we struggle to share our faith and so give up trying. Truth be told, here in Australia most churches are terrible at evangelism. Recently a comprehensive survey was conducted of all 1700 churches in the city of Melbourne. The survey discovered that even though many of those churches said they emphasise evangelism, an average of only 2 people per church are coming to faith per year. Put another way, in a city of over 3 million people, only 3,400. Melbourne has a population of just over 4million people. Less than 0.1% of them are converting to Christianity per year. Melbourne's population is growing by 70,000 people, or almost 2% per year. The trend is pretty obvious.

In Australian churches we are too often preaching to the already converted. We become inward, rather than outward focussed. Too often we are preoccupied with our needs, our wants, our desires when God is obsessed, and wants us to share His obsession in meeting the needs, wants and desires of the spiritually lost – those outside the walls of the church. Archbishop William Temple famously said:

The church is the only society in the world that exists for its non-members.
(William Temple)

The church exists for the sole purpose to bring glory to God. We glorify God when we lift up the name of Jesus and see those currently outside the church come to faith in him. If the church is to grow and season our world with the grace, mercy, love and justice of God – it will grow most healthily through effective evangelism.

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So today we tackle the 'why' question. Why bother with evangelism? Why bother telling others about Jesus when we risk ridicule, rejection, misunderstanding, marginalisation and frustration? Before we address how we best share our faith we must know why sharing it is so important. Today I want to offer you three key reasons why every follower of Jesus should do the work of evangelism. First, and most obviously;

We are Commissioned

The last words of Jesus in Matthew's gospel are a commission offered to his disciples, and by extension, to us:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
(Matthew 28:19-20)

If we are to follow Jesus, if we want to be his disciples then we will take his commission as a command and do as he asks. And that is exactly what the early church did; they proclaimed the Good News of Jesus first in Jerusalem, then in Judea, in Samaria and very quickly to the far reaches of their world. In Acts we read this:

Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah.
(Acts 5:42)

'They never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news.' Every conversation was an opportunity. Every relationship filled with possibilities. Every gathering overflowing with potential to share about Jesus.

The phrase 'Good News' is fascinating. It is the translation of the Greek word euangelion, which we translate as good news or gospel. In Jesus' day it was a political rather than a religious term. When Caesar had a great military victory or done something else noteworthy, he would spread propaganda throughout the empire through paid messengers who were a little like town-criers. The message from and about Caesar proclaimed by the messengers would begin, 'The euangelion – the gospel, the good news, of Caesar...'

Jesus first, then Paul and the other apostles appropriated this word and defined euangelion, or Good News as not about Caesar, but all about Jesus and his kingdom.

Caesar's messengers were called euangelestas – evangelists. They proclaimed the propaganda of Caesar.

We who are Jesus' disciples are euangelestas – evangelists. We proclaim the Good News of Jesus.

Here's the bottom line. If you claim to be a follower of Jesus, seeking to share your faith with others is not an optional extra of discipleship – it is essential. We can come up with all sorts of excuses, 'I'm too old, too young, too shy, too busy...' It doesn't really matter; they are just excuses.

When we became Christian we received the love and grace of Christ that transforms us from the inside out. That love and grace fills us. But we were never meant to be reservoirs of that love and grace, damming it up for our own exclusive benefit. Rather than reservoirs, as disciples, our lives are meant to operate like a conduit or channel that God's love flows through to others.

We are Compelled

If we are commissioned to share our faith, we are also compelled. You see, evangelism is not so much a matter of life and death, but a matter of death and life.

The Bible is very clear; when we choose to ignore God, when we choose to go our own way, when God is absent from our life, we are spiritually dead. Paul says to the Colossians of their life before Christ:

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You were dead in your sins.
(Colossians 2:13a)

Spiritual death describes our condition, our present situation apart from God.

Spiritual death also describes our ultimate destination should we choose to continue to reject God up the point we die physically. Again the Bible is clear. There is a final judgement. There are eternal consequences for our choices. There is a heaven and hell, both describe in the bible with rich metaphor. More than anyone else in scripture, Jesus was clear about this. In fact, outside the Book of Revelation, Jesus spoke more on the final judgment and heaven and hell than anyone else. Here is one example. Jesus said:

Fear him who, after your body has been killed, has authority to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him.
(Luke 12:5)

In Jesus' day, the concept of hell was vivid in people's imaginations. Just outside Jerusalem's walls on the south-western side is the Valley of Hinnom, or in Greek, Gehenna. It was the valley into which the cities sewers emptied, garbage was dumped and animal carcasses were burned. In Old Testament times it was the place where people would sometimes sacrifice their children to the Canaanite God, Baal. In Jesus' day, the Valley of Hinnom was a smelly, desolate place of perpetual fire, a place where no good person would willingly go, a garbage dump, a place of separation – Gehenna – Hell. And Jesus, like other Jewish teachers before him – uses this vivid, real life image to describe the bleak reality of a place of eternal separation from God for those who choose to remain in their sin.

Penn Jillette is one half of Penn and Teller, a duo that has been headlining Vegas shows for years with comedy and the art of illusion. He is also famous for being an atheist. He has never been shy about his disbelief in God, often writing about his atheism in articles and best-selling books. In an on-line video blog that can be found on YouTube, Penn shares a story about the time after a show a gracious Christian businessman gave him a Bible as a gift. Penn goes on to use the story as an opportunity to point out that Christians who don't evangelize must, in his words, really *hate* people. Here's the direct quote from his video blog:

I've always said...that I don't respect people who do not proselytize. I don't respect that at all. If you believe that there's a heaven and hell, and people could be going to hell or not getting eternal life or whatever, and you think that it's not really worth telling them this because it would make it socially awkward... how much do you have to hate somebody to not proselytize them?

How much do you have to hate somebody to believe that everlasting life is possible and not tell them that? I mean, if I believed beyond the shadow of a doubt that a truck was coming to hit you, and you didn't believe it, and that truck was bearing down on you, there's a certain point where I tackle you. And this is more important than that.

Billions in our world, millions in our nation and thousands in our city stare down the reality of spending eternity separated from the life of God, outside of God's presence. If we know this, and if we know how they might be rescued from this fate, then surely we are compelled to tell them how!

The gospels are littered with references to Jesus being 'moved with compassion' as he saw and experienced the spiritually lost and broken around him. In Mark's gospel we read that Jesus was moved with compassion when he saw a crowd gathering, desperate to hear from them. The crowd were like sheep without a shepherd, in other words, they were people without protection and hope. The word that is translated, 'moved with compassion' literally refers to being stirred in the gut, or the intestines. Ancient people thought that the seat of the deepest human emotions was not the heart, but the stomach and bowels and intestines.

Jesus experienced the spiritual lost and broken around him literally like a kick in the guts. He could not stand by and do nothing. He was compelled into action. In John's gospel, Jesus' summarises his mission and ministry with these simple and profound words:

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I have come that they may have life; and have it to the full.
(John 10:10)

Full life, abundant life, eternal life, life in this side of the grave and the other side as well. Jesus sees spiritual death and offers abundant and eternal life.

Evangelism is a matter of death and life.

In November 2010, a wedding party in Glenelg, Australia was unexpectedly called into action right after the wedding ceremony. While they were posing for pictures on a scenic ledge, a woman unrelated to the wedding fell into the water and started drowning. Dressed in his wedding suit, the best man jumped into the water and brought the woman back toward shore. Then the bride, a trained nurse, waded into the water and started administering CPR.

By the time the Surf Life Saving volunteers had arrived, the woman had regained consciousness and she was saved. After the daring rescue operation, the drenched but heroic best man and the bride happily rejoined the wedding reception and continued with the festivities.

This story serves as a powerful illustration of our calling as Christians; we're dressed up and ready and prepared for a wedding feast, for our eternal reward as children of God, for a heavenly party. But at the same time we're also prepared to dive into mission, even when it's inconvenient and dangerous. Here is the amazing thing; God wants to extend his saving presence through us to those who are spiritually drowning in our world. This is our incredible privilege and responsibility.

Perhaps more than anything else the church of Jesus Christ needs a spiritual kick in the guts so that we see a lost and broken world as Jesus sees it?

We are compelled to share with others about the saving love of God.

We are Captivated

We are commissioned and compelled to share with others the Good News of Jesus. On their own these are powerful motivational forces. Perhaps even more powerful still is when we share our faith because we ourselves have been captivated, entranced, astonished by the extent of God's love for us.

Billy Graham is probably the most famous evangelist of the past century. With humility and grace he has preached the gospel to tens of millions around our world. In 1979, when I was 13 years old, I had the privilege of attending the Billy Graham crusade in Sydney at Randwick racecourse. I remember it vividly. While I don't remember the content of the sermons Billy preached, I do remember the passionate energy with which he preached them. Everything in his voice, his gestures and his mannerisms communicated that here was a man captivated by the love of God and desperate to tell others what he had found and experienced.

There is a story told of Billy Graham riding in an elevator when a man recognised him and said, "You're Billy Graham, aren't you?" Billy Graham replied, "Yes." "Well," the man said, "you are truly a great man." Billy immediately responded, "No, I'm not a great man. I just have a great message."

We have a great message, and that message is our mission. The message is so compelling and so life-giving, it cannot be kept to ourselves; it demands to be shared. If we are not captured and captivated by the extent of God's love for us, then we our evangelism will always feel like raw obedience rather than a joyous privilege.

A couple of years ago I heard a speaker talk of her visit to Africa. While there she visited an extremely poor part of a city. It was dusty and hot and so she and her husband found an oasis in a small corner store where they decided they would buy a couple of ice-creams. They were followed into the store by a little boy that they had befriended just a few minutes before. As they bought their ice-creams, they offered to do the same for their new little friend. When they did,

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his eyes lit up and his face glowed. As soon as he got his ice-cream, he disappeared out the door running. But then a few minutes later he returned. But this time he returned with literally dozens of his little friends. You see, he had told them the Good News of the man and woman who would buy them a treat they could never afford, ice-cream under a hot, dusty African sun.

When the news is so good, the message become our mission.

Free ice-cream on a hot day is indeed Good News to a poor African child. He is captivated by it and has to tell others.

But how much more is it Good News that God is Love to a world that so lacking in love?

How much more is it Good News that God can heal shame and guilt for those who are imprisoned by the mistakes of their past?

How much more is it Good News that Jesus offers abundant and eternal life to those who face the real possibility of eternity separated from God by their sin?

Thirty two years ago I was captivated by God's love for me in Jesus Christ. I had grown up in church, I have wonderful Christian parents. I was a good boy! And yet when I tentatively placed my life in God's hands I was overwhelmed by the height and depth and breadth of God's love for me. I was captured and captivated by God's amazing grace.

The Bible says that:

God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.
(Romans 5:8)

God did not wait for us to get our act together before he loved us. His love his unconditional. His grace is free.

God did not wait for us to find our way back to him. In the cross of Christ He made a way! In the Cross of Christ, God our Father pursues us with his love – every lost child, every wayward son and daughter. This is the Father's Heart:

On Father's Day a couple of years ago I showed a clip from the movie Blood Diamond. The movie depicts the world of "conflict diamonds" during the political and social turmoil of Sierra Leone's civil war in 1999. Solomon Vandy is a Mende fisherman whose son Dia has been kidnapped by illegal diamond miners and brainwashed into becoming a child soldier, committing terrible crimes. For years Solomon searches for Dia, teaming up with a mercenary-turned-smuggler called Danny, played by Leonardo DiCaprio. Towards the end of the film, they locate both Dia and a very valuable diamond. But Dia has not seen his father for a very long time and his head is confused and cannot distinguish the truth. In short, Dia is not sure he wants to be rescued. Let's see what happens next: