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REIMAGINING EVANGELISM

Salespeople or Travel Guides?

Over the years, evangelism has gotten a bad name. It is sales, manipulation, TV preachers, big hair, pushing people to convert and going door to door. It elicits feelings similar to the intrusive practice of telemarketing. As Becky Pippert quips in her book *Out of the Saltshaker*, it is something you wouldn't want to do to your dog, much less a person you like.

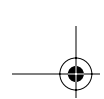
Evangelism has always had image problems. But the image problems for evangelism have only gotten worse in recent years. Photos of religious people, true believers, running planes into buildings and suicide bombing innocent men, women and children have only reinforced the pervasive conviction in our society that people who think they know the truth and that everybody else is wrong are not only misguided but positively dangerous.

How did we get to this place? How did a word that means “good news” get such bad press? And is there a way beyond the present impasse? Can we redeem the word—and the practice of evangelism?

The time has come to examine, and perhaps jettison, our old paradigms and pictures of evangelism. The time has come to re-imagine how we picture and practice sharing the good news about Jesus.

The time has come because the old pictures and practices aren't wearing well and aren't working well. People in our culture aren't responding. And people in the church aren't excited or engaged.





Many believers are as uncomfortable with and turned off by evangelism as the irreligious are.

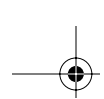
The time has come because our culture is shifting. We are moving from a modern, rationalistic, technique-oriented culture to a more imaginative, experiential and story-oriented culture. Our memorized scripts and canned techniques may have helped an older generation reach out to the unchurched, but at this point in history, our techniques and scripts are more a hindrance than a help.

The time has come because God is at work in new ways. People today are spiritual but not dogmatic. They want to know that God is *real* and not merely reasonable. They are looking for stories and experiences and connection to God more than logic and proof and reasons for God. And in the midst of this growing hunger for authenticity and reality, God is moving and God's Spirit is manifesting in powerful new ways.

The time has come because the West is no longer leading the way. Our teachers and mentors in the evangelism adventure are now African and Asian and Latin American peoples. The balance of spiritual power in the world is shifting to the global South. People who have suffered persecution, served the poor in their midst and learned to love their enemies have an evangelistic vitality that is contagious. They are now calling us to recover our spiritual vigor. We in the West are now more learners and receivers than leaders and senders. And the most crucial thing we are relearning from our brothers and sisters in the global South is the role and reality of the Holy Spirit in witness.

These are very exciting days in the life of the church. The time has come; the gospel can be renewed in our day, for it is the power of God for salvation. Let us listen to what God is saying by the Holy





Spirit and commit ourselves to reimagining evangelism for our generation.

THE OLD IMAGE

What is the Spirit saying to the church today about evangelism? Is the Spirit of God leading us into new ways to picture and practice evangelism and witness?

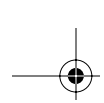
Some people argue for getting rid of the word *evangelism* entirely. One friend of mine calls his whole approach to evangelism “Non-evangelism for the Rest of Us.” I have great sympathy for his desire to overcome the barriers that the E-word brings up in many of us. But evangelism is biblical, and it is as crucial to the life of the church and the purposes of God as ever. We need new vision, new pictures and practices, not merely a rejection of the word *evangelism*.

But before we find our way to the new pictures and practices, we should review what the old pictures and practices were.

The paradigm that dominated much twentieth-century evangelism might be called “Evangelism as Closing the Deal on a Sales Call.” Many Christians think they have to dump their content on someone and then close the deal, or else they haven’t really shared their faith. This basic paradigm of evangelism as individuals seeking to make the close on a sales call permeates the evangelical consciousness. Our image of the evangelist is the image of a spiritual salesman.

This paradigm of evangelism is a barrier to Christians, for it leaves them feeling like they don’t really have a part to play in it. If they aren’t extroverted, persuasive, an expert on their product, skilled at responding to the questions that will come up, and able to be pushy and assertive when it comes to making the close, then





they don't identify with evangelism as part of their life and gifts. People often say to me some version of the following: "I don't like to push things on people if they don't want them. I'm kind of introverted, I'm not good at arguing with people, I avoid conflict, and I hate awkwardness in relationships. So evangelism is not for me. I feel guilty that I don't share my faith. But I feel inadequate, shut down and even inauthentic about becoming an extroverted crusader for God."

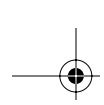
Such sentiments are widespread and debilitating. We feel like a salesperson selling a product that people mostly don't want. We are shut down because we are going by a script that doesn't work for us, and we have pictures and practices that don't fit us or the people we want to reach out to.

But we *can* recover our confidence and excitement. If we believed that God is at work everywhere and we're more like a detective discovering clues and a guide sharing wisdom, then evangelism would feel very different. We can look for God to be at work always and everywhere.

Before I explore the new image of evangelism, let me anticipate two criticisms people may make about this chapter and this book. First, some will say I have set up a straw man: I have caricatured the old model and thus set up the new model for easy acceptance. I agree. I have set up a straw man. But I have done so for an important reason. Many people in the church *and* many people outside the church have exactly this model, this straw man, in their minds, and it is a major barrier to many Christians' embracing evangelism as part of their life.

Second, people will notice where I have focused. I am focused on people who don't feel especially gifted in evangelism. I am very supportive of people who feel called to proclaim the gospel pub-





licly, but this book is not primarily addressed to them. The average person who wants to love and follow Jesus has much more to give their spiritual friends and potential spiritual friends than they are presently giving. It is that immense potential that I hope this book, and the Holy Spirit, will unlock and unleash.

If regular folks like us are filled with the Spirit and led by the Spirit and pursue conversations with spiritual companions, we may be used by God to change the face of the church and contribute much toward the redemption of people and the transformation of society. That's where I have chosen to focus.

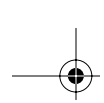
So let's explore a new image of evangelism.

WITNESSES AS TRAVEL GUIDES

In the Scripture, the word *evangelism* means "communicating or announcing good news." Based on that, let's try seeing ourselves as travel guides on a spiritual journey rather than traveling salespeople on a call. To make this mental shift, we can picture Gandalf and Galadriel, Frodo and Samwise instead of TV preachers and door-to-door salesmen. Gandalf and Galadriel, Frodo and Samwise are all characters in J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* books, which Peter Jackson turned into a blockbuster movie trilogy, the last of which won the Academy Award for best picture. I have loved Tolkien's fantasy for many years, and as I open myself to reimagine evangelism, these works of fantasy provide some wonderful pictures of how to pursue conversations with friends on a journey.

The hero of the books is Frodo Baggins, a hobbit. Hobbits are little people with hairy feet who love the simple pleasures of life: smoking pipeweed, drinking ale, gardening and dining many times a day. Frodo goes on a journey to destroy the great Ring of





Power—a symbol of the temptation to dominate and control others and our world. In that sense, Frodo’s journey is above all a spiritual journey, and along the way he is accompanied by travel guides who function as good “evangelists.” You might also call them spiritual mentors. Some you may be able to identify with, and some you may not. But all of them practice the art of spiritual guidance at key moments in Frodo’s spiritual quest in ways that you may find applicable to your relationships with seekers and skeptics.

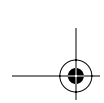
A WIZARD’S WISDOM

Gandalf is a wise person who not only gives good advice and guidance but above all exemplifies a well-lived life. One of his most striking “evangelism” moments with Frodo comes on a journey through caves and tunnels under a mountain. These tunnels, the Mines of Moria, were built by the race of the dwarves.

Gandalf is leading the company of travelers through the tunnels and comes to a three-way fork in the road. Unsure of which direction to take, Gandalf pauses, lights his pipe and considers the options. Frodo approaches Gandalf, because he has seen a creature following the company through the mines. This creature turns out to be Gollum. Gollum held the Ring of Power for many years and fell into spiritual ruin as a result of his addiction. He had possessed the Ring, and the Ring had come to possess him. He then had lost the Ring to Frodo’s uncle, Bilbo Baggins, and now spends his life trying to recover it. In a short and simple conversation, Gandalf shows us the art of being a spiritual travel guide for the journey.

FRODO: it’s a pity that Bilbo did not kill him [Gollum] when he had a chance.





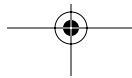
GANDALF: Pity—it was pity that stayed Bilbo’s hand. Many that live deserve death, and some that die deserve life. Can you give it to them, Frodo? Do not be too eager to deal out death and judgment. Even the very wise cannot see all ends. My heart tells me that Gollum has some part to play yet for good or ill before this is over. The pity of Bilbo may rule the fate of many.

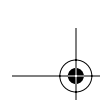
FRODO: I wish the ring had never come to me. I wish none of this had happened.

GANDALF: So do all that live to see such times, but that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given to us. There are other forces at work in this world, Frodo, besides the will of evil. Bilbo was meant to find the ring, in which case you also were meant to have it, and that is an encouraging thought.

Gandalf speaks just a few words, yet throughout the rest of the journey, Frodo returns again and again to these words. Gandalf has seen clues of “God” at work in Frodo’s life, and he points the clues out. His words aren’t cliché or obvious or overstated. He suggests that just maybe something much bigger is at work in Frodo’s life than Frodo realizes. And then he helps Frodo to focus on the important issue: What next step will he take? How will he respond to the clues that he has? What will he do with the power of choice?

Couldn’t you do that with friends on their spiritual journey? Couldn’t you look for clues of God at work? Couldn’t you make suggestions? You might say, “I wonder if what you’re going through is a God-thing. I wonder if your spiritual doubts and struggles and experiences are a clue to something bigger that is at work in your





life. What do you think? If so, how will you respond?” It may not sound like much. But I believe identifying clues of the presence of the Spirit in the lives of seekers and skeptics is at the heart of the image of evangelism that God wants to challenge us with.

AN ELF QUEEN’S VULNERABILITY

During the journey through the darkness of Moria, the company endures a battle in which Gandalf apparently falls to his death. The others make it through and, in great grief and despair from the loss of Gandalf, arrive in the Elven land of Lothlorien, ruled by the elf queen Galadriel (played by Cate Blanchett in the movie).

While others sleep, Frodo and Galadriel meet late at night in a grove, and Galadriel shows Frodo the future if his quest should fail. Then they have a “spiritual guidance” conversation.

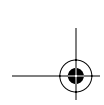
FRODO: If you ask it of me, I will give you the One Ring.

GALADRIEL: You offer it to me freely. I do not deny that my heart has greatly desired this. In place of a dark Lord you will have a Queen, not dark but beautiful and terrible as the dawn, treacherous as the sea, stronger than the foundations of the earth. All shall love me and despair.

She stood before Frodo seeming now tall beyond measurement, and beautiful beyond enduring, terrible and worshipful. Then she let her hand fall, and the light faded, and suddenly she laughed again, and lo! She was shrunken: a slender elf-woman, clad in simple white, whose gentle voice was soft and sad.

GALADRIEL: I pass the test. I will diminish, and go into the West, and remain Galadriel.





FRODO: I cannot do this alone.

GALADRIEL: You are a Ring Bearer, Frodo. To bear a ring of power is to be alone. This task was appointed to you, and if you do not find a way, no one will.

FRODO: Then I know what I must do. It's just—I'm afraid to do it.

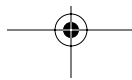
GALADRIEL: Even the smallest person can change the course of the future.

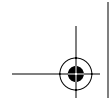
Galadriel gives Frodo a great gift. She shows him her soul. She reveals the temptation with which she struggles. She becomes vulnerable about her own soul's darkness. But she also shares her triumph. She chooses the way of humility and sanity and wholeness. She will remain true to who she is, even if that means she will diminish or die.

Often we think of evangelism as sharing our strengths, having it all together spiritually. We think that's what it means to be a witness. Galadriel opens to our imagination a different way. Our weakness, our story of struggle, even the truth about the cost of our choice to follow God—these are the greatest gifts we have to give to others in their journey.

Good travel guides know that stories of failure and struggle and doubt, of wrong turns and missed opportunities, are as important and compelling for other travelers as stories of success. They are the “humanizing” dimension of the story of the journey and the source of many of the most important lessons and pointers along the way. They help us know that we are all on a similar journey and can fail in similar ways.

Did you ever think that the greatest gift you could give to your





seeking and skeptical friends is the story of your spiritual struggles and doubts? As you reveal some of the vulnerability and even the darkness of your soul, along with your choice to be true to who you are despite the cost, your friends will listen. Your authority in part comes from your authenticity, the authenticity of your struggles and your flawed humanity.

EVANGELISM HOBBIT STYLE

The last “evangelistic” moment I want to raise from the Lord of the Rings movies comes out of an interaction between Frodo and his faithful friend and companion Samwise Gamgee, or Sam.

Sam has just saved Frodo from being carried away by an enemy and has pulled Frodo back from the brink of being swallowed up by his addiction to the Ring of Power. And Frodo resents it, is furious. The Ring has gained increasing power over Frodo’s will. He is at a very dark moment in his spiritual journey, and he does something that is terrible. Drawing a knife on his most faithful friend, he comes close to stabbing him for his interference. If you have ever confronted a friend or family member who is being swallowed up by an addiction, you will have some idea of the scene.

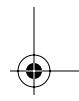
Sam, this little hobbit, very simple and down to earth and not often good with words, shines very brightly at this moment in the art of spiritual guidance.

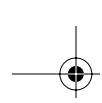
SAM: It’s me. It’s your Sam. Don’t you know your Sam?

[Frodo puts the knife away and falls back.]

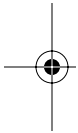
FRODO: I can’t do this, Sam.

SAM: I know. It’s all wrong. By rights, we shouldn’t even be





here. But we are. It's like in the great stories, Mr. Frodo, the ones that really matter. Full of darkness and danger they were. And sometimes you didn't want to know the end, because how could the end be happy? How could the world go back to the way it was because so much bad happened? But in the end, it's only a passing thing. This shadow, even darkness, must pass. A new day will come. And when the sun shines, it will shine out the clearer. Those were the stories that stayed with you, that meant something, even if you were too small to understand why. But I think, Mr. Frodo, I do understand. I know now. Folk in those stories had lots of chances of turning back, only they didn't. They kept going because they were holding on to something.



FRODO: What are we holding on to, Sam?

[Sam takes Frodo, helps him to his feet, looks into his eyes and speaks with quiet conviction.]

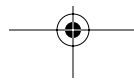


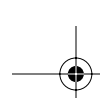
SAM: That there's some good in this world, Mr. Frodo, and it's worth fighting for.

Sam tells the Great Story, what we who are followers of Christ would call the "kingdom story." He gives Frodo hope. He points the way forward. He invites Frodo to understand his part in the story of the triumph of goodness over evil and life over death.

So often we package the gospel in ways that make it seem irrelevant to our daily lives and to the course of current events. But Sam has understood it is all a part of a larger story that has meaning and purpose and direction. And we can each be part of that bigger story.

Evangelism is telling the story of God's ultimate victory over the darkness, in our world and in our own soul. Evangelism is inviting





people to take their part in that big story. Sam is not very articulate. Nor does he take himself too seriously. But he knows the story, and he sees the point of it. When Frodo is in need, when he is close to despair and ready to give up, Sam is ready to tell the story and remind Frodo that he has a place in it. He challenges Frodo not to give up and not to go back.

How can we become such storytellers? How can we recover the dimensions of the bigger story that will speak to the seeking friends with whom we are on the journey? How can we get beyond the packaged gospel to the good news of hope and healing and victory over the darkness?

Together, I hope these images begin to awaken in your heart a new hunger to reimagine evangelism and to take your part as a witness, a journey guide.

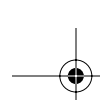


NEW WAYS TO CONNECT AND COMMUNICATE THE GOOD NEWS

This image of the evangelist as travel guide and the definition of evangelism as conversations with people on a spiritual journey lead to shifts in our pictures and practices at every point. Here are the shifts in pictures and practices that we will explore in this book.

Collaboration versus activism. Most of us get tired just thinking about evangelism. Our old model directs us to share the good news with everybody all the time, whether we know them well or not and whether spiritual conversation is appropriate or not. We must build friendships, talk to strangers, study the Bible with unchurched people, share the gospel, call them to Christ and then follow up. Don't you just get tired reading that list, let alone thinking about doing it? And yet we feel like anything less falls short.



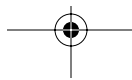


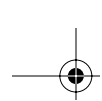
What if we rediscovered the role and reality of the Holy Spirit? What if we saw ourselves as collaborators rather than activists, looking for clues about where God is already at work, expecting God to nudge us, being in an attitude of prayer whenever we were with unchurched people? Evangelism could become an adventure in detection rather than a burden of making it all happen.

Community versus individual. God is far more committed to raising up witnessing *communities* than to raising up witnessing *individuals*. Our sales model leads us to think of individual salespeople fanning out across the landscape, going door to door and person to person. Though individual witness is certainly important, the Holy Spirit fills a Christian community and uses the community as a body in witness. Each member has its own particular contribution to make, according to the gifts each person has been given. More important than each of us doing the same thing to witness to others, we each must do our particular part. Then our witness together will be much greater than the sum of our parts.

Further, today people come to Christ primarily in the context of community. Belonging comes before believing. Evangelism is about helping people belong so that they can come to believe. So our communities need to be places where people can connect before they have to commit.

Friendship versus agenda. Our old model focuses on the agenda—downloading our content and closing our deal. We easily assume that if we haven't shared the whole ball of wax and challenged people to commit their lives, we haven't done evangelism. But the model of conversations with spiritual friends delights in the relationship itself and rejoices over every spiritual conversation. As Brian McLaren likes to say, we count conversations and not just





conversions. So we learn the art of spiritual friendship and authentic conversation.

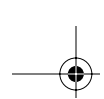
Story versus dogma. Our old picture focuses on certain truths or beliefs we are to communicate. The sin of humanity, the judgment of God and the sacrifice of Christ as he takes the just judgment of God on the cross in our place are some of the primary truths we are to communicate. If we haven't communicated those particular truths, we feel we haven't evangelized. The new model doesn't lose those truths but realizes we don't start there. People today are much more concerned about an experiential reality of God than about dogmas and beliefs. Whenever we have been able to tell a story about God's reality, then we have had good spiritual conversation. We have evangelized!

The outside-the-box Jesus versus the cliché Jesus. People in our culture think they know what Jesus is about. And many are intrigued by Jesus, but they don't want to talk about Jesus with church types. Church types seem to have Jesus in a box and talk about Jesus in very uninteresting ways. Our old model emphasizes bringing up Jesus and the benefits of Jesus whenever possible. And so the recipients of this sales approach never know when Jesus might pop up. It might be anytime, but they always know what he will look like. He's kind and good, saves you, fulfills you, and is the answer to any question you might have, and lots of questions you don't have.

The new model brings up Jesus naturally and in noncliché ways. Jesus surprises people not by popping out at every moment but by looking very different from what was expected when he does appear.

Good news about God's kingdom versus good news about the afterlife. The old model emphasized how we could be forgiven of our sins and go to heaven after we die. But actually that wasn't Jesus' focus, though it was part of his message. Jesus' main message was that the





kingdom or rule of God is at hand. The rule of God is the act of God to set things right and to make people and the world work as they were intended to work. So Jesus talked much more about this life than about the next, much more about changing this world than about giving us a free pass to the next.

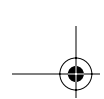
Journey versus event. Our model of conversion has pushed us to draw lines in order to figure out who's in and who's out, and we look for a one-time event, a decision, that distinguishes people on the outside from those on the inside. I don't know about you, but for me this constant attempt to figure out who has become a Christian and who's in and who's out has been a very frustrating and fruitless experience. The new model, a model based on the image of journey, sees all of us as moving either toward the goal or away from the goal. If the goal is to be a wholehearted follower of Jesus, then we are at different points along the way. But the crucial question is whether we are moving toward the center and beginning to follow in the footsteps of the Leader.

Each chapter will look at one of the shifts in our picture and practice of evangelism. We will explore the shift, see if Scripture backs it up, look honestly at barriers and brainstorm to help us pursue the new model, and end with some practical skills that can get us ready for the challenges that will face us on the spiritual friendship adventure.

Through each of these explorations, we will look to the Holy Spirit to teach us and lead us. After all, the Holy Spirit is the true witness to Jesus. The Holy Spirit has been pursuing conversations with people he loves on a spiritual journey for the past two millennia. The Holy Spirit has much to teach us if we will listen and learn.

A final word: Although the sales model is the box people of our





culture have most commonly put evangelism in, the relational evangelism model can itself be a box. We can build trust and friendship with people but never get to the point of challenge. People are not loved when we build trust but never communicate truth. So the new model, the new ways of communicating and connecting, must transcend the relational evangelism box just as much as they transcend the sales box. We need a fresh wind of the Spirit, and new ways to connect and communicate, so that God can set his people free for transformational witness. Even the emphasis on friendship, though healthy and wise can hold us back. We can learn to look to the Holy Spirit, build trust, and share ourselves and our faith authentically with others, whether we have just met them or known them for years.

Reimagining evangelism can help set us free for authentic and Spirit-empowered witness. But risk is inescapable. If we are looking for risk-free evangelism, we will never influence people toward Christ.

So are you ready for the adventure of spiritual companionship, conversation and challenge? Are you ready to share what wisdom and experience you have with others? If so, let's go!

