



*OUT OF THE
SALTSHAKER and
INTO THE WORLD*

*EVANGELISM AS A
WAY OF LIFE*

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CHAPTER ONE

SLEEPLESS IN SPAIN

Christians and non-Christians have something in common: we're both uptight about evangelism. Our fear as Christians seems to be *How many people did I offend this week?* We think that we must be a little obnoxious in order to be good evangelists. A tension builds inside: *Should I be sensitive to people and forget about evangelism, or should I blast them with the gospel and forget about their dignity as human beings?* Many Christians choose to be aware of the person but then feel defensive and guilty for not evangelizing.

A YEAR ABROAD

I certainly felt that way during my junior year abroad at the University of Barcelona, Spain. Of course I wanted my friends to know God, but every time I got up courage to be vocal about Jesus, an image leaped into my mind of an aggressive Christian buttonholing an unwitting victim. As a nonbeliever I had thought many Christians were weird, spreading leaflets on street corners and nabbing strangers. I was terrified that if I said anything at all about Christ, my friends would consider me just as strange. And I would agree with them. There was a part of me that secretly felt evangelism was something you shouldn't do to your dog, let alone a friend.

To evangelize, it seemed, required insensitivity and an inclination to blurt out a memorized gospel outline, without inhaling, to every stranger

you met. It never occurred to me that my pre-Christian, unredeemed, almost common sense understanding about how to relate warmly to people might be valid. For instance, I knew how offended I had been as an agnostic when someone tried to push religion on me without even bothering to discover who I was or what I believed. That was a proper response, I see now, for I should be offended when I'm being treated as someone's evangelistic project instead of as a person.

Yet when I became a Christian I thought I was supposed to toss in my common sense perceptions in order to be spiritual. I thought I was called to "offend for Jesus' sake." How I thought I was supposed to share my faith went against my very grain. But, I thought with a somewhat twisted logic, *Is it really so much to ask that I turn people off as soon as I meet them, when you think of all that Christ has done for me?*

Still, I knew Christians were called on to do hard things. And because it was so hard to do, I thought such evangelism had to be spiritual. The result was that I would put off witnessing as long as possible. Whenever the guilt became too great to bear, I would overpower the nearest unsuspecting skeptic with a nonstop running monologue and then dash away thinking, *Whew! Well, I did it. It's spring and hopefully the guilt won't overcome me again till Christmas.* (And I'm sure my skeptic friends hoped the same!)

I witnessed like a Pavlovian dog. The bell would ring; I would get ready, activated, juices running; and then—*BAM!*—I'd spit it out.

Paradoxically, I also knew that unless I really cared for my friends, they would never be interested in the gospel. I was deeply moved by the way Jesus demonstrated compassion to the people he met. I wanted to do the same, although it didn't occur to me that this had much to do with evangelism. So I tried to reach out and care for the people God had placed around me. But I felt guilty for not giving a gospel outline to every nonbeliever I met.

It wasn't that I never spoke about my faith; in retrospect, however, I was far too paranoid about people's responses to me and consequently too silent. But one thing hindered me from speaking: I felt that unless I gave a person the whole ball of wax, all at one time, then I wasn't "evangelizing." So when my friends at the University of Barcelona said

they were curious about my faith and began asking questions, I thought, *Isn't that amazing! And I wasn't even evangelizing!*

So I approached my year abroad in Spain seeking to establish caring relationships with students and asking God to touch their lives. I also asked him to teach me how to share my faith and to free me from fear.

During this time I lived with Ruth Siemens, who was working for a collegiate ministry called the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students. She is a remarkable woman, abounding in gifts, intelligence, zest and vision. Every time we talked about my desire for ministry, she suggested I start a Bible discussion for my friends who were seekers. I acted as though it was an interesting idea, but to myself I thought, *Well, that's what happens when you've been in the Spanish sun for too long. You sort of lose touch with reality.*

But Ruth was persistent, and at last I decided to do it even though I thought it was ridiculous. She helped by coaching me on what to say as I asked my friends to a study on the life of Christ. Assuming I was having a conversation that related to spiritual things, I could say, "How would you like to come to a study on the biographies of Jesus Christ?" or "Wouldn't it be fascinating to examine the primary source documents to see for ourselves what Jesus has to say and who he claims to be?" or "Why don't we see for ourselves how Jesus views the role of women?"

When the actual moment arrived, my fear was so great that it reduced me to a rather catatonic state, and I mumbled, "You don't want to come to a Bible discussion, do you?" To my amazement and alarm, they all said that it was a great idea and that they were eager to come. The study was to begin the following Wednesday evening at my apartment.

One of the surprises was the kind of people who wanted to come. Without realizing it I had formed a mental picture of the people God would lead me to. I expected it to be the "likely" ones: those who seemed a bit passive or lonely or vulnerable. But it wasn't at all the anemic types that God brought into my life. They all seemed terribly normal. They were vital, opinionated, interesting people who had strong questions about the existence of God as well as about everything else. They were

stimulating to be around, but I would never have thought of them as being open to spiritual things.

Then I met Mary. She was a young Irishwoman taking a year's study in Spain. She was bright and funny, with a ready quip for everything. I invited her over for a meal to meet my roommates. I wondered if she would be interested in coming to the Bible discussion. Suddenly, not knowing yet that I was a Christian, she said, "This has been the best month I've had all year! Do you know that I've talked three people out of being Christians this month!"

I gulped and thought, *Thank goodness I didn't ask her to the Bible discussion! I would die if someone like that ever came.* The next day I ran into her after class and she smirked. "See you next Wednesday at seven. What a lark that will be! I wouldn't miss it for the world!"

I smiled blankly and said it would be great, but nothing registered in my mind. What was I doing next Wednesday? Wednesday! Oh, no—it wasn't possible. How did she find out? Who told her? Nothing could possibly be worse than Mary coming to the Bible discussion.

I raced to my apartment to tell Ruth and my other roommate, Kathy Lang, the terrible news. Then I noticed a sly expression on their faces. "OK," I demanded, "which one of you did it? Who betrayed me?"

They laughed but refused to confess. They said simply that God was answering my prayer by bringing spiritually open students to the Bible discussion. I moaned and wondered who else God would bring that would be as open and receptive as Mary.

One thing was clear: God and I had drastically different opinions about who was spiritually open. He seemed to have a special attraction to hard-core cases. And I felt he wanted to give them all to me.

I had Christians all over Barcelona praying. It was almost my first experience in leading a Bible discussion, and to do it with a group made up mostly of nonbelievers terrified me. Then Wednesday came. The study was to begin at 7:00. It was 7:15 when the doorbell finally rang. I opened the door, expecting to see the crowd, but there stood Mary, alone. She sauntered in, took a quick look around and said, "My, looks like you're really packing them in tonight."

“Ah, well, you know how busy everyone is, and it’s early yet. Listen, make yourself at home and I’ll be right back,” I said as I dashed to the bathroom, closed the door and burst into tears. I felt so ridiculous. Everyone was praying for me and would ask how the Bible discussion went. And then of all people to show up, it had to be Mary.

I returned and decided to make polite conversation, thinking she would leave soon. Instead, she abruptly asked, “Why are you a Christian? How can you be a thinking person and reject your mind? It’s intellectual suicide to believe something without any evidence to support it.”

“Mary,” I said with unexpected courage, “I couldn’t agree with you more. I’ve always been amazed by people who can accept Christ blindly. But you know what else mystifies me? How anyone can reject Christianity blindly without bothering to investigate the evidence.” And so began a two-hour conversation. We discussed such issues as the historicity of the New Testament documents, the uniqueness of Jesus and the evidence for the resurrection. It seemed largely an intellectual exercise to me.

Then as she was leaving I popped John Stott’s book *Basic Christianity* into her hands. “Read it sometime in the next couple of years,” I said as she walked out the door. No one could have ever accused me of using pressure tactics.

The next day the others who were supposed to come to the study apologized and said they had completely forgotten. But they promised they would be there next Wednesday. And next Wednesday came. I felt reassured. God wouldn’t let me go through another experience like that. And once more I asked several Christians in Barcelona to pray.

So 7:00 came. Then 7:10, 7:15, 7:20, and finally the doorbell rang. I rushed to the door, eager to see my friends. I threw open the door, but only one person was standing there—Mary.

Once more she took a quick look around and said, “This Bible discussion is really dynamite, isn’t it? Never seen such crowds.”

That did it. This was the closest thing to martyrdom I’d ever experienced. “Mary, would you excuse me for a minute. I’ll be right back,” I said and rushed into the bathroom again. I couldn’t believe it. This was the second week I had prepared the same passage. I had prayed every

day. And the only “faithful” member was Mary! I didn’t understand, but I returned to Mary, hoping she would leave quickly so I could cry later. Instead, she said, “I read that book you gave me. I came to that chapter on sin and I wanted to hide under the bed.”

It never occurred to me as she spoke that the Holy Spirit was convicting her of sin. I merely thought it was a strange but interesting response. She plied me with questions and told me a great deal about her life and her family. I began to glimpse for the first time who she was—a sensitive young woman who covered her questions and wounds effectively. I was moved as she shared her life, and I genuinely cared for her.

Still, her initial disdain and negativity toward Christianity intimidated me. I thought that perhaps God was seeking her. What I didn’t see was that her badgering me with questions, her coming to the study, even her hostility and anger were signs that she was grappling with God.

Then came the bomb. She suddenly looked straight at me and said, “I feel like God is over there,” as she gestured with her hand, “and I am over here. I’ve really wanted to know God all of my life. But how do I bridge the gap? What would I do if I wanted to become a Christian?”

I stared at her in disbelief. No one had ever asked me that question. I felt not only inept but terrified that at this crucial moment God wouldn’t come through. I had wondered what I would do if this ever happened, but the same scenario had always plagued me: The person would ask me to become a Christian. I would say, “Fine. Let’s just pray together and ask God to come into your life.” We would pray and then she would say, “Uh, Becky, I hate to say this, but . . . um . . . I don’t feel any different. I mean I feel just exactly the way I did before we prayed.” I would secretly think, *Oh, how embarrassing!* but I would say, “Well, listen. Why don’t we just try it again.” We would pray again, but then she would tell me she still felt the same. Then I would say, “Well, look, it’s Saturday. Maybe weekends are a busy time. Let’s try it again next week.” And I would escape as fast as I could.

Just the thought of facing such an episode made me quake. And here was Mary, asking me to help her, immediately, directly and now.

“Well, what should I do?” Mary asked me.

“Uhhhh, well, I guess you could, um, pray,” I answered weakly.

“I don’t know how. What should I say?” she persisted.

“Well, uh, you could tell God what you told me,” I stammered.

“OK. When should I tell him?” she asked.

For the first time I brightened. “You can tell him the minute you get home,” I replied, leaping from my chair and ushering her quickly out of the room. “As soon as you get home, just tell him everything,” I said as I pushed her through the front door. “And read the last chapter of Stott’s book on how to become a Christian,” I shouted as she walked down the steps looking a bit bewildered.

I felt miserable. God wasn’t asking John Stott to lead Mary to faith; he was asking me. And I felt I had failed. I had been ashamed and embarrassed. I felt inadequate and unqualified to help Mary. But most of all, I lacked the faith and the guts to believe that God actually would come through and that he could use me. So I tried to forget the entire incident. After all, maybe Mary had just had a bad day. She was probably feeling emotional and would have been terribly embarrassed later if I had done anything anyway.

The next day Ruth returned from a trip. As I recounted my experience with Mary to her, she became more and more excited. Before I could even finish, she interrupted, her eyes shining, and she said, “Oh, Becky, then you led her to Christ, right?”

And I answered, a bit subdued, “No, actually I led her out the door.”

It was the only time I ever saw Ruth unable to cover her disappointment. “Becky! Why not? You’ve led other friends to Christ, haven’t you?”

“Uh, well, let’s see now. It’s kind of hard to remember. I guess, uh, actually, uh, no.”

Mary returned to my apartment a few days later. I was amazed to hear her account of what happened after she left me and amused by how she described it. She told Ruth in a somewhat exasperated tone, “Well, I asked Becky what to do and she told me to go home. But at least she said to read the last chapter of that book. Now listen, I really do believe this stuff and I prayed that prayer at the end of the book. Does that mean I’m ‘in’?”

Ruth assured her that she was indeed a child of God. But I remained somewhat skeptical and waited to see the results. The results, by the way,

were that Mary grew steadily and is a Christian to this day. It was apparent that God had been working on her a long time before I ever met her.

BEING YOURSELF

Two feelings came from this experience. One was a feeling of failure. I think we could safely say that, by most standards, I had failed. I felt sadness over my lack of faith and courage—but not despair. In fact, my other feeling was hope. That experience made me realize that when God is seeking a person, he will not allow my fear, my feeling of intimidation or my lack of knowledge or experience to prevent that person from finding him. With all the mistakes, I still had seen the power of God at work overcoming my clumsiness and helping me speak to Mary.

The more I reflected, the more I realized that I couldn't have done it worse. And yet Mary had survived me! Even with all my mistakes, God had used me. Granted, I wasn't much more than a warm body sitting in front of her. But I had guided her to the right book. At least I had tried to answer her questions, and I genuinely cared for her.

This experience forced me to reflect seriously about my problems in evangelism. I had thought that only with a slick presentation, a polished formula and memorized verses could anyone be successful in evangelism. But I discovered that God was indeed glorified in my weakness.

If anyone had told me then that I would eventually be writing a book on evangelism, I would have laughed uproariously. The incongruity simply would have been too great. It has been a long pilgrimage with many failures from my experience with Mary to where I am today. And even now, when I speak on the subject of evangelism, I often sense people are breathlessly waiting for the same thing that I was: a new argument-proof, jelled approach, the magic formula that works on one and all or your money back. But even if I had such a formula to sell, it still wouldn't work.

Our problem in evangelism is not that we don't have enough information—it is that we don't know how to be ourselves. We forget we are called to be witnesses to what we have seen and know, not to what we don't know. The key on our part is authenticity and obedience,

not a doctorate in theology. We haven't grasped that it really is OK for us to be who we are when we are with seekers, even if we don't have all the answers to their questions or if our knowledge of Scripture is limited.

But there is a deeper problem here. Our uneasiness with non-Christians reflects our uneasiness with our own humanity. Because we are not certain about what it means to be human (or spiritual, for that matter), we struggle in relating naturally, humanly to the world. For example, many of us avoid evangelism for fear that we will offend someone. Yet how often have we told our skeptical friends that that's why we are hesitating?

At Sproul Plaza on the campus of the University of California, Berkeley, I met a female student one afternoon. Our conversation moved to whether we believed in God. It was an easy, almost casual talk. I began telling her about my faith in Christ, and she seemed interested. But as I became more enthusiastic about what it meant to be a Christian, she seemed to withdraw emotionally. Still, I kept on talking about Jesus—for want of knowing what else to do. But even though my mouth kept moving, I was very aware that I was turning her off. So there I was, having a private conversation with myself, trying to figure out how to stop, while I could hear myself talking to her about Christ.

Suddenly I realized how ridiculous all this was, so I said, “Look, I feel really bad. I am very excited about who God is and what he's done in my life. But I hate it when people push ‘religion’ on me. So if I'm coming on too strong, will you just tell me?”

She looked at me in disbelief. “I can't believe you just said that. I mean, I cannot believe you honestly said that,” she answered.

“Why?” I asked.

“Well, I never knew Christians were aware that we hate being recipients of a running monologue,” she answered. (So much for my evangelistic skill.)

“Listen,” I responded, “most Christians I know are very hesitant to share their faith *precisely* because they're afraid they'll offend.”

“But as long as you let people know that you're aware of where they're coming from, you can say anything you want!” she responded immediately. “And you just tell Christians that I said so.”

Her response was perceptive. What she was saying was that when I told her I hated to be someone's evangelistic project, I was also establishing that we had a great deal in common: I didn't want to dump the gospel and she didn't want to be dumped on. That is a natural response, a human response and a shared response. What surprised her was that I was human, too, not some superdisciple whose feet never touch the ground. In fact, I am offended by the same tactics she is. So on the basis of our strong, common human bond, I was freed to communicate my faith.

God has given me increasing freedom to talk about him to others. But my experience with Mary made me realize that, although some of my friends had become open to God through my influence, no one had ever become a Christian in my presence. Even if they wanted to, I wouldn't let them! As I pondered my discomfort about evangelism, I discovered several things about myself.

For one thing, I was so afraid of being identified as a religious fanatic or a Bible banger that I often remained silent when the topic of God came up. How people saw me mattered more than how God saw me. Ironically, most people respect and respond to a person who has definite ideas and who communicates them clearly rather than to someone who seems apologetic and wishy-washy. My experience in Spain confirmed that.

When I was a student in Spain, I was amazed to see how "evangelistic" and bold the Marxists on campus were. Their style wasn't obnoxious, but they were convinced and it showed. They communicated their beliefs articulately and with zeal. As I watched students respond to them, I was surprised to see how open they were and how much respect they had for someone who really believed in something and was willing to stand up for it.

All of my paranoia about how I thought people would respond if I were bold about Christ had made me defensive. If I had gone to a religious retreat, I would stammer when asked, "How was your weekend?" Or I would tend to hide my Bible under other books so my agnostic roommates wouldn't think I was strange. (As if that kind of behavior would keep people from thinking I was strange!)

I was behaving this way, I told myself, in order to be sensitive to seeking friends. But to them I looked weird, and the Marxists seemed confident and convinced. I finally had to agree with the apostle Paul that if we fear God first, then we will try to persuade people (2 Cor 5:11). Whatever you fear (or supremely respect) the most you will serve. Fearing what people thought of me, I served them and it backfired. When I began to fear and respect God the most and then serve him, I felt a new freedom to share my faith, whether I won a popularity contest or not. I didn't feel called to be offensive, just more bold. And the irony was that, since I wasn't trying to please them first but God, people listened and wanted to know more.

I found out something else: I didn't understand other people's genuine desire. Although I saw the needs and emptiness in the lives of my friends, I couldn't imagine that it was Jesus Christ they were really searching for. Jesus was for "religious folk," not for my pagan friends. So because I never really expected them to respond to the gospel, they didn't.

This feeling was associated with my own self-doubt. I feared that Jesus was just "my thing." Wasn't it arrogant to suggest that my view was the only way? But as I grew to understand the nature of Christianity, I saw that our faith stands on historical data as well as subjective experience. Truth was the ultimate issue, not a feeling in my heart. God was asking me to stand not on my own ideas or emotions but rather on the person and work of Jesus Christ. If anyone was guilty of being offensive, it was Jesus—not me. Realizing this freed me from cowering when accused of being narrow. I could answer, "I know, and isn't it amazing that Jesus actually said so many scandalous things? People of his day were as offended by his claims as we are. Wouldn't it be intriguing to study him to discover why he felt justified in saying what he said?"

Still, I was paralyzed by the fear of offending people and forever ruining their chance of entering the kingdom. So I thought, "I'll just be nice and smile and hope they catch on." Well, Girl Scouts smile too, so that can't be all there is to witnessing for Christ. Furthermore, I realized that I was giving myself too much credit. What I was saying was that if I made one mistake or couldn't answer one of their questions, then it was all over. They were doomed. Their eternal destiny rested on my

ability to know every answer. God might be eternal and powerful, but he could never again reach the person I had offended or the one whose question I could not answer.

It's odd. If you are sensitive enough to realize that you could offend someone, then offending others is probably not your problem. What I often see is this: sensitive people who run around saying, "I'm just so afraid of being insensitive." So they remain silent when what they need to be is more bold. Or instead of finding creative ways of expressing faith, they spend their time proudly pronouncing what they don't do. "I have never used gimmicks or buttonholed people like those others guys." It's easy to agree about how evangelism is done poorly. But how pleased is God going to be when he asks us what we have done with our lives and we reel off everything that we *didn't* do?

Finally, I saw that I had a problem talking about God naturally. I was fine until the topic of religion came up. Suddenly I felt as if I needed to sound spiritual, and instead of listening I would panic because I couldn't remember any Scripture verses. My hands would get clammy; my eyes would dart from side to side in the hope that no one else was listening; the tone of my voice would change and I would begin to talk "religiously." Then I would wonder why they looked so uncomfortable when we talked about spiritual things.

The truth is, *I* was the one whose tone had changed. My problem was that I didn't think God could be a natural, integrated part of an ongoing discussion about films, raising children, taking classes or gardening. When speaking to skeptics, I kept my discussion of God too compartmentalized and separated from "normal" living.

THE STRENGTH OF WEAKNESS

These new insights began to free me. Mary's growth and flourishing as a young Christian affected my faith and my ability to witness. But it was the conversion of another atheist friend of mine eight months later that brought fresh discoveries and permanent change into my life. I will tell that story later in chapter ten. But it was what Stephanie told me the night she became a Christian that startled me.

“At first I thought, *Fine, let Becky have her religion—that’s her thing,*” she said. “*I’m not the least bit interested, but if that’s her thing, then it’s all right with me.* Then you invited me to dinner and before we ate you asked if we could thank God for the food. I thought, *Oh, how quaint.* Only you didn’t just thank him for the food—you thanked him for me and our friendship. It touched me profoundly and unexpectedly. I’d never heard anyone pray so personally before, much less thanking God for *me*. I never thought you felt our relationship had anything to do with God. But then I caught myself and thought, *That’s ridiculous—thanking someone who doesn’t exist for me.*”

“Then we went to the Bergman film and afterward you said you’d studied the very same concept that was in the film in the Bible that day. I never dreamed an ancient faith would have anything remotely in common with cinema! Another day you invited me to an objective, no-strings-attached study of the person of Jesus in the Bible. Fine. Only the trouble was—I was truly drawn to this figure called Jesus! He seemed so real as we would read about him each week. I found myself wondering what Jesus would say about different situations I’d find myself in during the week.

“But you know what affected me most? All my life I used to think, *How arrogant for someone to call himself a Christian, to think he’s that good.* But then I got to know you—and Becky, you are far from perfect, yet you call yourself a Christian. So my first shock was to discover you ‘blow it’ like I do. But the biggest shock was that you admitted it, where I couldn’t. Suddenly I saw that being a Christian didn’t mean never failing, but admitting when you’ve failed. I wanted to keep Christ in a box and let you be religious during Bible studies, but the more you let me inside your life, the more impossible it became to keep the lid on Christianity. Even your admission of weaknesses drove me to him!”

That confession changed my life. What astonished me was that she had seen me in all kinds of circumstances—she had seen the real me—and it gave the gospel more power, not less. I had always thought I should cover up my doubts and problems because if she knew me she wouldn’t become a Christian. But the more open and transparent I was (even with my weaknesses), the more real Jesus became to her.

Please get this straight. In saying we must be human with each other, I am not condoning sin. God calls us to obedience. I am not suggesting we share our weaknesses as if we were in a “competitive sinning” match in order to prove we are real. Sin isn’t God’s desire for humanity; loving obedience to him is. But so is humble confession when we fail. So our goal must be to live within the balance of aiming for full obedience and humble openness. The paradox I constantly experience is that as I allow people inside—to see who I am with the pain and problems as well as the successes—they tell me they see God. It’s when I cover up (ironically, for “God’s reputation”) and try to appear “together,” with no problems, that they can see only Becky.

I had to learn from experience what Scripture teaches in 1 Thessalonians 2:8: to share the gospel we must share our life, our very selves. If we don’t grasp that Christ has freed us to be authentic, we will see evangelism as a project instead of a lifestyle. And we will tend to see non-Christians more as objects of our evangelistic efforts than as authentic persons.

I once asked a woman if she felt comfortable about evangelism. “Oh, yes!” she responded. “I do it twice a week.” (Somehow it sounded more like taking multiple vitamins.) Evangelism isn’t just something you “do”—out there—and then get back to normal living. Evangelism involves taking people seriously, getting across to their island of concerns and needs, and then sharing Christ as Lord in the context of our natural living situations.

The problem stems from our great difficulty in believing that God is glorified in our utter humanity rather than in our spiritually programmed responses. Most of us fear that who we are inside just isn’t enough. So we cover up our honest questions and doubts, thinking we won’t sound spiritual. But in doing this we forfeit our most important asset in evangelism—our real person. Not to accept our humanness means we lose our point of authentic contact with the world. We, of all people, should be offering the world a picture of what it means to be truly human. Yet it is often Christians who fear their humanity more than anyone else. When we get a good look at Jesus, we will see that it is not our humanity we need to fear.

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