

Evangelism in the early church

Tim Keller, October 2018

There has always been a strong tendency for Christians to “withdraw into a kind of closed, evangelical, monastic community.” (as John Stott says in *Motives and Methods*, p.14.) This is not, of course, how things were in the beginning of the church.

In Michael Green’s seminal *Evangelism in the Early Church* (2nd ed, Eerdmans, 2003), he shows that early Christianity’s explosive growth “was in reality accomplished by means of informal missionaries.” (Green, p.243) That is, Christian laypeople, not trained preachers and evangelists, carried on the mission of the church “not through formal preaching, but informal” conversation — “in homes and wine shops, on walks, and around market stalls ... they did it naturally, enthusiastically ... Having found treasure, they meant to share it with others, to the limit of their ability.” (Green, p.243-244.)

It’s clear from the New Testament and from other historical documents that one of the main centers of Christian evangelism was in the *oikos* — the ‘household.’ A person’s strongest relationships were within the household — with blood relatives, servants, clients, and friends, so when a person became a Christian it was in the household that he or she would get a serious hearing. If the head of the household became a believer (such as Lydia the seller of dye and the Philippian jailer) the entire home became a ministry center — where the gospel was taught to all the household’s members and neighbors. If, however, some other member of the household became a Christian — the wife, children, or slaves and laborers — then the gospel would spread more indirectly. (Green sketches out the different ways the gospel moved through households, depending on who was the first convert. pp.322ff.)

Household evangelism was very important, but from both the Bible and from early historical record we know that simple friendship was one of the main carriers of the gospel. We see it in John 1 when Philip passes his knowledge of Jesus on to his friend Nathaniel.

Green relates how Pantaenus led Clement of Alexandria to Christ, Justin led Tatian, Octavius led Minucius Felix to Christ — all through friendship, a relationship that was taken very seriously by the ancients.

Michael Green gives an extended account of how the future St. Gregory was won to faith. When Gregory was eighteen, he and his brother were traveling to study law at Berytus (today, Beirut). But on their journey they came to Caesarea in Palestine where they met the well-known and respected scholar Origen. He persuaded the brothers to remain for a while and let him tutor them in the history of philosophy. They stayed, and to their surprise, Origen did not keep the traditional distance between professor and pupil but opened his life to them as friends. He connected the principles of philosophy to Christian teaching and showed how that teaching changed one's life in the most personal and practical ways. Gregory stayed and received his full education under Origen for seven years, and in the process was converted to Christianity. (Green, pp.342ff.)

It is informal but sustained relationships and conversation that will become more important in our increasingly secular world, as many Christian beliefs are highly offensive to people, as was the case in the first century. Now, as then, most people won't show up to hear Christian public speakers. Movement toward Christian belief will have to be personal, organic, and incremental. We must question our friends' working answers about meaning, morality, identity, and hope. We must also take time to answer their questions about Christianity.

But don't call this "friendship evangelism." Friends share their hearts with each other and do what's best for each other. If you are a Christian, then evangelism will come out naturally and organically in friendship if you don't let your pride, fears, and pessimism cut it off and make you hide your faith and heart from them. It is the gospel that tells us we are completely accepted in Christ. That removes both the fear that keeps us from being vulnerable, and the pride that could lead us to treat friends as 'evangelistic projects.' That is to dehumanize them. You are not befriending them just to give them the good news; you are giving them the good news because you love them as a friend. The more these gospel dynamics are present in our lives the more we will draw in new people like a magnet (Acts 2:47) and help them find faith in the most credible,

natural, and fruitful way.

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