**Olivet Baptist Church, Westport ON 2019.10.27**

**Understanding the Path to Faith in Post-Christian and Postmodern Canada.**

**Introduction**

That title may sound a bit lecture-ish, but really I just want to introduce you to a bit of what I’m learning about evangelism in preparation for the seminar I mentioned earlier. Let’s begin with prayer. … Our Scripture reading is Mark 4:26-29. There Jesus says,

26“This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. 27Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. 28All by itself the soil produces grain - first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. 29As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come.”

The point of the parable is that the sovereign God is in charge of human history, and He Himself will manifest the Kingdom in full when Jesus comes again.[[1]](#footnote-1) The sower of the seed doesn’t need to fully understand what’s happening, indeed it is beyond his power to understand it. He needs to understand enough in order to water and weed at the proper times. Finally, he must recognize when harvest time has arrived so he can begin bringing in the sheaves.

When we apply this parable to personal evangelism we need to keep in mind the same things. When a person comes to Christ, it is the result of a process in which we play the role of the assistant who understands enough to help draw people towards salvation in Christ. And we are assistants because it’s God the Holy Spirit, not us, who moves people through the process and saves them.

But we’re no longer talking about tending seeds and soil, we’re talking about tending relationships, and this is often complicated and difficult, as we all know. And we must discover what it’s like for lost people who are taking steps towards Christ, and how we can truly help them along the way.

**What do practitioners tell us about evangelism in post-Christian, postmodern society?**

First, practitioners, those whose ministry is evangelism, say that many people today are no longer willing to listen to a Gospel presentation using the four spiritual laws, the bridge, the wordless book, or by appealing to reason as in CS Lewis and *Mere Christianity*. Simply creating a situation where you can make a Gospel presentation rarely works any more. Well, if these traditional methods don’t work very well these days, what does?

Fellowship missionary to Pakistan, Mark Naylor, describes how he learned to practice evangelism differently in post-Christian and postmodern Canada by using “significant spiritual conversations”. He says,

“I stopped approaching relationships with an agenda to present a gospel message. I gave up the sense of guilt that drove me as if I was responsible for people going to hell. I no longer have a “plan of salvation” that can be diagrammed on a napkin. I am free from the burden to “deliver” or “win”.

“Instead I discovered that my role is to engage people in significant spiritual conversation, rather than convince them to enter the kingdom.

“My goal is now to become a conversationalist who does not need to perform, only listen and respond. To talk to people I need to have a true relationship with them and engage them with a desire to deepen that relationship, not for the purpose of finding an opportunity to make a “presentation.”

“I discovered that the method that is effective within the Canadian context is not the proclamation of a message but the development of relationships within which significant conversations occur. That is, I now seek to explore with people the ways they make sense of the world. People are seeking spiritual reality and significance for themselves but often lack the opportunity to express their personal journey to sympathetic listeners. Sincere and open conversation that respects contrasting opinions is both appreciated and enjoyable when there is no pressure to “win.”

“Jesus is the truth that this world needs to find peace with God. We do not need programmed approaches in order to expose the people in our lives to the light of the world. Rather we need to hear, engage and respond so that the light that is within us can shine in a way that does not blind, but illuminates.”

Carrying on sincere and significant spiritual conversations with non-Christian friends sounds promising, but just how does the Holy Spirit draw people to Christ, and how can we assist Him? Some recent research into the process of conversion helps us answer these two questions. This research was undertaken because two American IVCF leaders in the 1990s found that their traditional evangelism methods had become practically ineffective in the face of postmodern thinking. So they asked 2000 new converts to tell their stories of how they came to faith. After analysing these stories, and in consultation with other leaders, they found that the postmodern journey of faith was a process that involved crossing five thresholds as non-Christians moved step by step towards salvation. They started using this information to assess what stages non-Christians were at in their journey, and what threshold was next. The approach worked. They shared their findings with others who then had similar success with the approach. Several years later they convened a conference to see if the approach was still valid. Those using it reported continued success so it seems to have stood the test of time so far. In 2007 they wrote a book about it. Don Everts and Douglas Schaupp, *I Once Was Lost*, IVP Books.

Let’s take a brief look at these five thresholds in the process of salvation and how we can use significant spiritual conversations to help the non-Christians in our lives cross them, if they choose to do so.

**The Five Thresholds of Postmodern Conversion**

When I mention my ministry or my faith in Christ to my non-religious family members or acquaintances or strangers, they usually respond with silence and change the topic, or they show polite indifference, but not often any level of real interest. But sometimes we do have significant spiritual conversations. The practitioners tell us that many people in post-Christian Canada often have some level of distrust towards religious people, including Christians. **The first threshold** is crossing over from distrust of Christianity and Christians to trusting a Christian. The practitioners found that people crossing this threshold say something like, “I didn’t trust Christians until I met some who didn’t act or talk like I expected.” Establishing ourselves as a trustworthy individual who happens to be Christian is our first goal in building a real, caring relationship with a non-Christian. The book, “I Once Was Lost” gives practical wisdom about how to do this.

**The second threshold** is crossing over from indifference about Christianity to becoming curious about Jesus. The practitioners found that people crossing this second threshold may say something like, “I had no interest in my friends’ Christian faith, but now I want to know more about Jesus”. When people trust each other, they begin to share their lives. When significant spiritual conversations happen between friends who trust each other, the non-Christian becomes aware of our trust in Christ. Awareness of Jesus may grow into engagement with what the Bible says about Jesus, which may intensify into a real exchange of ideas, serious discussions of spiritual matters. Again, the book, “I Once Was Lost” describes in full how we can provoke such curiosity in others.

But even intense curiosity only takes people part way down the road to Christ. **The third threshold** is crossing over from being closed to change to being open to change in life. People crossing this threshold may say something like, “I enjoy discussing faith and Jesus, and that led me to realize that I’m missing something in my life”. We must be patient as it is very difficult for any of us to accept change. Our book says, “They need to know that we are their friend regardless of what they decide. They need to know that we like them even as they are, not only if they change.”[[2]](#footnote-2) As with all stages in this process, we need to pray constantly for them. Again, the book gives additional guidance on how to engage with people at this stage.

But even when someone becomes open to change in his life, that doesn’t mean he has yielded control of his life to Jesus. He’s headed in the right direction but is not yet seeking Jesus as his personal saviour. **The fourth threshold** is crossing over from meandering towards Jesus to actively seeking Him. That crossover may be described like this, “I made a few sensible lifestyle changes, but now I’m seriously considering Jesus’ place in my life”. True seekers are on a urgent quest to discover if Jesus has something to say to them that is worth the cost of the changes they know He will expect from them. They feel mostly comfortable with Christians, but ask lots of difficult questions. We need to listen closely and answer their questions with the unvarnished truth. “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have” (1 Pet. 3:15b). There is a lot that you can do to help seekers, as our book reveals.

There comes a time when the true seeker decides to follow Jesus, or not. **The fifth threshold** is crossing over from living outside the Kingdom to new life inside the Kingdom. It is conversion, repenting and following Jesus. An example would be, “My best friend challenged me to follow Jesus, and I knew it was time to make a choice. I decided to follow Jesus, and she showed me how to start the journey.” The book has a lot of wisdom about helping our non-Christian friend as he approaches this threshold and crosses over it. It goes way beyond getting them to recite a simple prayer.

I need to tell you a personal story to make a couple of points. Jim, one of our oldest friends, has been a pastor for over 35 years. When we were all a lot younger, somebody from high school invited him to CSB at LaSalle Park Baptist, and to Youth Group. Mel Merek was the captain of CSB in those days, and he and Jim argued about faith and Christianity at every Council Ring. This continued in Youth Group. One Friday night, as usual, the discussion continued in my car as I drove him home. When we got to his house, I said something like, “Maybe it’s time you got real with God.” I probably said this a little impatiently. I didn’t know it, until years later when Jim told me the story, that night he decided to repent and turn to Christ.

This illustrates and emphasizes the role of the Holy Spirit in conversion, and the role of God’s people. The HS worked a lot in Jim’s life through Mel and many others, and I happened to be part of the process. We should not be the only Christians in relationship with our non-Christian friends. If it takes a village to raise a child, then it takes a faith community to guide that former child to faith in Christ as the Holy Spirit superintends the process.

**Conclusion and Challenges**

I introduced you to these five thresholds because they help me see how the Holy Spirit uses believers to bring people to faith in Christ. The thresholds help us to discern just where our friends are in their journey from darkness into the light. Knowing this tells us, as the HS’s assistants, how to help them move forward - when to stay silent and listen, and when to nudge or challenge them. This is a skill set that can be learned, if we are willing to trust God to help us. I find myself challenged as I prepare for this seminar, and I really wish my African Canadian friends had chosen something else for their seminar topic. I feel tempted to say to God, “All this is really interesting and challenging, but you can’t teach an old dog new tricks.” But I don’t say that because I know He will reply, “I’m not teaching dogs, and I’m not teaching tricks.” So I’m sharing my challenges with you.

**What are these Challenges?**

Do you and I trust Jesus enough to learn how to start significant spiritual conversations with non-Christian friends and relatives?

Are you and I willing to learn how to recognize where someone is on their spiritual journey so we know how to cooperate with the Holy Spirit when He gives us the opportunity for a significant spiritual conversation with our family member or neighbour?

Are we as indifferent to the salvation of non-Christians, as they are indifferent to our faith? And how often do we pray for someone’s spiritual needs compared to how often we pray for our own material needs?

Are we as open to the Holy Spirit changing us as we hope our unsaved relatives will become open to the love of Christ?

1. Mark 4:26-28, *EBC (Revised), Vol. 9*, p. 761. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *I Once Was Lost*, 71. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)