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Lance C. Hahn

Bridgeway Christian Church, bigdog@bridgewaychristian.org

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THE POWER OF FAITHFULNESS IN RELATIONAL EVANGELISM

Lance C. Hahn

Bridgeway Christian Church, Roseville, California, USA

Abstract

Many evangelistic efforts bear little fruit. It may be due to our inability to convey the right information, but it may also be due to an inappropriate environment for the information to be interpreted correctly. This article describes a process that God may use to engage a person whose heart has been prepared, so that the seed sown is received, not only as truth, but with joy. Relational evangelism carried out faithfully allows consistent sowing until chaotic moments open the heart.

God is a God of order.

When the earth was formless and void God illuminated the universe and fashioned the earth into a beautiful and orderly habitation. When winds raged and waves crashed, Jesus calmed them with a word. When the young demon-possessed slave girl heckled Paul the Apostle for days on end, he cast out the spirit and peace descended upon her.

God has always mended broken things and turned messes into redemptive epics. Therefore, where darkness and confusion reign, the

Kingdom of God shines the brightest. This is most true in the lives of people. God's most cherished creation draws his attention like none other. His love knows few bounds when it comes to protection, rescue, and salvation.

Humans, on the other hand, respond to chaos with desperation, ill-equipped to deal with uncertainty and disorder. When the façade of control is broken open, mankind faces its impotence, its fragility, its lack. It is then that a person is willing to have a dialogue about the things that matter, about the One that matters.

The Case for Relational Evangelism

The best and healthiest form of evangelism is done through meaningful and heartfelt relationships. Although 'cold call' methods were effective in the past, that day is most likely gone. With access to technology that allows detailed filtering systems, and due to decades of bitterness from advertising bombardment, it is almost impossible to start a meaningful conversation with a stranger. In the church I pastor, Bridgeway Christian Church, the single most common reason that people have come to our church over the last twenty-two years is word of mouth. Back in 2003, when we were a small church, I drew a family tree of how our congregation was connected, placing the name of every family in a bubble and attaching it to the person or means through which, or through whom, they came to Bridgeway. Almost every bubble was tied to another family or person with whom they had a significant relationship. In 2018, I again examined the origins of our congregation by holding a live poll on the weekend of December 15th through the 16th. Over 2000 congregants engaged in the electronic survey and the results were similar to the previous results.¹ Most people, 78.4%, when asked how they first heard of Bridgeway, responded "from a family member or a friend." Similarly, 90.3% responded "through a family member or friend" to the question, "How did you first learn about Christianity?" After two decades of ministry at this church, it has become clear that most people come to faith in Jesus Christ through a close and trusted relationship.

Nevertheless, as a North American Church, we have desperately tried alternative methods to reduce the time needed and to avoid the intimacy demanded for relational evangelism. We have attracted a few

through impressive programs, but time, attention, love, and relationships are always more effective. Today is no different from yesterday. People in the post-modern world are craving connections. They are refusing to respond to modern mass ministry. But since we, as ministers are busier than ever, we try again and again and again to shorten the process and mass-market it. It is not working.

Ed Stetzer says, “Postmoderns do not fit into a nice little cultural box, but all people with a postmodern mindset have this in common: They need to be reached with the gospel of Jesus Christ, and the current pattern of church isn’t reaching them.”² The attractional model of “Let’s make it better and maybe then they’ll come” is a misnomer. Dan Kimball, in his book, *They Like Jesus But Not the Church: Insights from Emerging Generations*, wrote in 2007, “People who need to hear the gospel most likely aren’t going to their church. On Sundays, they are sleeping in, shopping at the flea market, going out to breakfast – they’re anywhere but at a church meeting. I don’t know why we think that if we have good preaching or add a worship band or have coffee and candles that they will come. Those things are all good, but people outside the church aren’t looking for a church with those things. They aren’t looking for a church at all.”³

I am as guilty as anyone. I dream of a world where people hear about what great things are happening in my church and come through the door by the droves. I want them to crave the messages I have prepared, experience the hospitality my team has created, soak up the environment we have crafted, and eagerly scoop up the visitor’s mug on the way out, looking forward to next week’s service. And yet, ironically, I do not want those same people wandering into a Mormon church or a Buddhist temple merely out of curiosity and find something attractive there. I would hope that they have a trusted friend with whom they can talk to help them know what they would be walking into. That is exactly what is happening when people visit churches. Someone walking into Bridgeway Christian Church for the first time is most likely with a friend or family member with whom they have a relationship. All the programs and warmth only matter to them once they are in the door, brought by someone with whom they have a relationship.

In their book, *The Master’s Plan for Making Disciples*, Win and Charles

Arn say, “The conclusion is clear: The majority of people today can trace their ‘spiritual roots’ directly to a friend or relative.”⁴ It is for this reason that we need to focus on the already existing relationships that church members have with people outside the church. Dr. Gary McIntosh, in *Growing God’s Church: How People Are Actually Coming to Faith Today*, explains, “There is a direct connection between the number of unchurched friends the adult worshipers of your church have and the potential growth of your church.”⁵ But how do we achieve this potential growth? All of us have friends and family who need to receive Christ but whom we have not brought to church. All of us have had conversations about the Lord that have not been productive. Michael Parrott reports in *Street Level Evangelism: Where is the Space for the Local Evangelism?* that “99 percent of the leadership ministries believe that every Christian, including leadership, has been commanded to preach the gospel to a lost world...[yet] Ninety-five percent of all Christians have never won a soul to Christ.”⁶ Even Pastors and church leaders do not seem to be personally bringing people to the Lord. Among my friends who are pastors of churches in Northern California, very few, if any, actively evangelize their friends and family personally. If we, pastors and church leaders, struggle to evangelize those whom we love, how can we expect our congregants to reach the world around them?

There are hundreds of great evangelism and church growth books. I am the last one who should be giving professional advice since I am not blessed with the gift nor calling to the office of evangelist. But I am a follower of Jesus and for that reason, I am called to do the work of an evangelist, whether it comes naturally to me or not. So, what can I offer to the plethora of opinions about the how, the why, the when, and the where of sharing our faith effectively? I can only propose my personal experience and what I have seen work in my own context.

The Chaos Effect: The Open Door

Pastor, author, and discipleship expert Mike Breen of the ministry 3DM, speaks of the “Person of Peace,”⁷ mentioned by Jesus in chapter 10 of both the Gospel of Matthew and of the Gospel of Luke. Specifically, Luke 10:5-6 (NEV) says, “Whatever house you enter, first say, ‘Peace be to this house!’ And if a son of peace is there, your peace will rest upon him. But if not, it will return to you.” Some ministry

opportunities bring a person face to face with someone open to the gospel and some do not. Christ's instruction was that his followers should spend more time focusing on those 'people of peace' rather than with people behind a door that remains closed.

This concept of receptivity is what I call the *Open Door*. Although we are biblically called to cast a wide net across cultural boundaries, forcing us out of our comfort zone, it is clear that some people have been prepared by the Holy Spirit to receive the gospel and some have not. The Lord tells us, "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him."⁸ This means that no matter how hard we try, no matter how smooth and winsome our methods, no matter how many evangelism books we have read, we will never get through to someone whom God has not prepared. It is rarely possible to discern who has and who has not been prepared from a distance. Usually, we only know whether people are prepared after we interact with them, up close and personal. Until we know with certainty that someone is called or not, it is wisest to continue loving and dialoging with them in case there is a barrier they need to get past in order to open up.

Not only does it depend on the person, but it can also depend on the *time* and *situation*. It is my opinion that God is constantly whispering to everyone on the planet and that there are certain times when God speaks more loudly. Periodically, the communication becomes more intense to get the person's attention. Will we be there for our friends when God opens up their hearts?

God has many ways to open someone's heart. Sometimes it is his kindness that leads to repentance.⁹ But often it is hardship. The hardship may come in the form of struggle, fear, confusion, godly sorrow, or a host of other tribulations. Bad dreams and circumstances introduced King Nebuchadnezzar to Daniel and Joseph to Pharaoh. Leprosy connected Naaman and Elisha. Sorrows and loss drove men and women to the feet of Jesus during his earthly ministry. The same is true today. I wish it were not that way and I suppose God feels the same. Jesus taught that those who have hardship are blessed, for they will finally be open to God. The struggle creates the open door.

Difficulty tests existing constructs. For the most part, human beings rely on ideas and concepts that are tenuous at best. They

organize their lives around a false sense of safety and have confidently built a house of cards. When those cards fall down, when chaos enters into their seemingly orderly lives, they recognize what is missing. George G. Hunter writes, “People become more receptive to involvement with a church during a season of their lives when they are ‘between gods.’ They have given up on whatever they most recently relied upon to complete their lives and are open to something else.”¹⁰ Everyone goes through difficult times. Every person on the planet gets slapped in the face with reality once or twice. At those times people are more open to the idea that all is not under their control and that they need help from someone greater than themselves.

So, we must look for an opportunity to present the Truth to whom the Lord has prepared. Such an opportunity occurs when a person’s heart is softened, when the soil is tilled and receptive. We never know when that will be, so we need to be consistent, faithful lovers of people, steady servants, and ever ready beacons of hope. We are to be friends at all times, but we are most helpful when our friends go through difficult times. If we have not been a safe and wise friend to them during the bright times, they will not seek us nor trust us in the dark times. This requires steady faithfulness.

Examination of Motives

The motives for sharing our faith are important. I have been in ministry long enough to know that motives for ministry are varied and they are not always altruistic. When ministering to people in their point of pain, we need to examine our motives. If our motives are self-serving, the process will go wrong, and the person will likely end up worse than before. To take advantage of someone in their time of need is deplorable. Ends do not justify the means. Although someone may pray a prayer of salvation under coercion, that does not mean that it is sincere. The amount of baggage that can accumulate during an inappropriate evangelistic effort is staggering.

There is only one good motivation for evangelism, love. The early church did it for the right reasons. Michael Green, in *Evangelism in the Early Church*, says,

“This gratitude, devotion, dedication to the Lord who had rescued them and given them a new life, this sense of being commissioned by him and empowered by his Spirit to do the work of heralds, messengers and ambassadors, was the main motive in evangelism in the early Church. These people had been gripped by the love of God which had taken concrete form in the person of Jesus...Magnetized by this love, their lives could not but show it, their lips could not help telling it.”¹¹

George Hunter III, in his book *The Church's Main Purpose*, says, concerning coercion, “The early disciples did not seem to try to ‘sell’ people on following Jesus for any other ‘benefits’. His benefits, like healing and exorcism, were apparently extended to people in need whether they ever became disciples or not; some did, some did not.”¹² Many times Christians see only the statistics and not the hearts behind the statistics. It is vital that we love people whether they go to the altar or not. The world does not need more religious people taking advantage of desperate situations to peddle their goods. Followers of Christ need to respond to the opportunities that God provides and to love others steadily in order to make a difference when the doors open.

Appropriate Ministry at the Critical Moment

If we saturate our relationships and friendships with love, if we purify our motives, if we cautiously follow the Holy Spirit into that sensitive opening of doors, if we are faithful in the good and bad times and finally an opportunity comes, what do we say? What do we do? Too many times we freeze up when someone finally opens up to us. We may fear saying the wrong thing or fail to have answers. Surprisingly, most of the ministry has already been done before that critical moment. What we have done previously speaks louder than the words coming out of our mouth at that moment. Therefore, we must be faithful in our love and purposeful in our relationship building. When the chaos hits our loved ones, the Holy Spirit has assured us that he will give us the words to say because this moment is more important to him than it is to us. What does this look like?

When someone’s life is turned upside down by pain, loss, grief,

sorrow, fear, anxiety, or depression, our concern for them compels us to ease the pain and find a solution for them. Although we cannot personally solve their problems, we know the One who can. It is in the darkest hour of their lives that Jesus makes the most sense. It is when the shiny lights and the shimmering glitter are gone that the deep questions of life surface: Who am I? What am I doing here? What truly matters? Those are questions that lead to life-changing conversations. Those moments are opportunities to do what our love begs us to do for our friends, present the hope and help found in the gospel. We are not taking advantage of a situation, we are utilizing what we have been given to bring healing to those whom we care about the most, in their most challenging time.

We must listen more than we talk. When we finally speak it needs to be with love and tenderness. This is not the time for blame, it is a time for solutions and Jesus is their solution. He may not fix all of their surface problems and he may not remove their pain and loss, but he will certainly begin a process of restoration. The Bible tells us that, although bad things happen to good people, Jesus' love for his followers brings transformation. Jesus is a master at redemption. He takes bad situations and makes them better, glorious. He can feel people's pain and hold their hand in the darkness. He is not afraid of what we are afraid of. Our job in those moments is to communicate the truth to our friends and loved ones. The truth that Jesus loves them and cares for them. The truth that this world is broken, and that we all need a Savior. The truth that it will not always feel like this because the Comforter, the Holy Spirit, knows how to pick up all the pieces of a broken heart and put them back together. It is not our role to make unrealistic or inappropriate promises to make them feel better. We do not have to. We have access to the "Good News." The gospel is not a set of facts that they need to memorize while they contemplate their depravity, the gospel is the truth about the possibility of a relationship with their Creator. Whatever they are going through right now, it will be far better to walk hand in hand with one who is omniscient, omnipresent, and omnipotent. What they need is an introduction to him.

Let me share a personal example. As a high school senior, I was involved in a rock band. A young sophomore kid, who played guitar and had long hair like me, took a liking to me and we played music on

and off together. We struck up a friendship. He did not have a church background, nor was he one to talk about feelings. I was loud about my faith but received little confirmation that he was listening or cared. Then one day after a girl broke his heart, he called me. He revealed to me that he too wanted to be a Christian like I was since it seemed to make such a big difference for me. To me, it was out of the blue. To the Lord, it was right on time.

Here is another more recent example from our small group ministry leader. She wrote to me, “I’ve been messaging a young woman who was interested in joining our Missional Community. She’s new to town, doesn’t have family or community here, and has experienced a lot of loss and pain over the last few years. Social anxiety and distance from God have also compounded her pain and isolation.” This young leader explained that after a series of no-shows and after many invites, she felt led to invite her one more time. To the leader’s surprise, the young woman came and had a wonderful time and joined the community. The pain in her life in that season was so great that God broke down her fear, isolation, and hardness of heart so that she might receive him. She is now a part of our congregation. If the small group leader had not been so faithful in inviting her even when it looked fruitless, this story would have turned out very differently. But she was a faithful friend and the Lord took advantage of it.

What About the Rest of the Time?

What do we do while we are waiting for the “open door” brought about by the chaos of life? What fills the days when our neighbor’s life is not in shambles and everything seems to be going wonderfully? Is there a ministry mandate during the good times when people are feeling self-sufficient with no need for a Savior? Yes, there is. Although we turn up our intensity during times of opportunity, we are still to live as Christians. That means we are to love faithfully regardless of the visible outcome. It means that while we are developing relationships with the people around us, we are sowing seeds. We may pay special attention to people dealing with chaos in their life, but we do not ignore other people. We are not spiritual ambulance chasers.

When Donald McGavran wrote the book, *Understanding Church Growth*, he addressed this concept of receptivity and the concern that

may arise when we adjust our ministry efforts to respond to open hearts. He wrote,

“Recognition of variations in receptivity is resisted by some mission thinkers because they fear that, if they accept it, they will be forced to abandon resistant fields. Abandonment is not called for. Fields must be sown. Stony fields must be plowed before they are sown. No one should conclude that if receptivity is low, the Church should withdraw mission. Correct policy is to occupy fields of low receptivity lightly. They will turn receptive someday. They also have children of God living in them...While they continue in their rebellious and resistant state, they should be given the opportunity to hear the Gospel in as courteous a way as possible. But they should not be heavily occupied lest, fearing that they will be swamped by Christians, they become even more resistant.”¹³

We do not abandon those who are content, we sow. We are always to seek openings and opportunities the Lord may be orchestrating, but when we do not see open doors, we continue to live as Christ has called us to live, as children of God. God is consistent in His love for His creation and children. There is no ebb and flow with His concerns and care. He simply adjusts his methods for timely seasons. We are to be building relationships regardless. We are to be pouring out love regardless. We are to be consistent with our new nature.

Conclusion

In short, our job is to love others through the ups and downs, to be faithful friends in the good times and the bad, and to be alert and listening to the Holy Spirit at the moment chaos opens the door for the gospel. Once a person decides to follow Christ, we do not stop as if we have bagged a prize; it is then that our love and friendship are the most important to the person. It is in the blackest night that a candle is most useful, when a person is moving from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light, becoming all that God intended the person to be.

Love steadily, be faithful, and keep your eyes open. Your moment to partner with God to transform a human soul may be right around the corner.

¹The number of those responding varied throughout the thirty-nine items on the survey, from 1879 to 2600.

²Stetzer, Ed. *Planting New Churches in a Postmodern Age*. (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2007, 336 pages), 130.

³ Kimball, Dan. *They Like Jesus but not the Church: Insights from Emerging Generations*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007, 272 pages), 238

⁴ Arn, Win and Arn, Charles. *The Master's Plan for Making Disciples*. (Monrovia, CA: Church Growth Press, 1982. 176 pages), p. 46.

⁵ McIntosh, Gary L. *Growing God's Church: How People are Actually Coming to Faith Today*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2016, 192 pages), 157

⁶ From "Street Level Evangelism: Where is the Space for the Local Evangelist?" by Michael Parrott, *Acts Evangelism*, Spokane, WA, 1993, pp. 9-11.

⁷ Breen, Mike. *Building a Discipling Culture* (3DM International publishing, 2017, 300 pages)

⁸ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*. (2016). (Jn 6:44). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

⁹ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*. (2016). (Rom 2:4). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

¹⁰ Hunter, George G. *The Apostolic Congregation: Church Growth Reconceived for a New Generation*. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2009, 141 pages), 77.

¹¹ Green, Michael. *Evangelism in the Early Church*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003. 474 pages), 282.

¹² Hunter, George G., III. *Go: The Church's Main Purpose* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2017, 164 pages), 28.

¹³ McGavran, Donald A. and C. Peter Wagner (editor). *Understanding Church Growth* (Third Edition). (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990, 332 pages), 261-262.

About the Author

Lance C. Hahn has been the Senior Pastor of Bridgeway Christian Church in Roseville, California, since 1997. He received his M. Div from Western Seminary, Portland, Oregon, and is currently pursuing a D.Min at Talbot Theological Seminary. He is the author of two books, *How to Live in Fear: Mastering the Art of Freaking Out*, and *The Master's Mind: The Art of Reshaping Your Thoughts*. He has participated in many podcasts, written numerous articles, spoken at conferences, and served as an adjunct professor.

