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Not Just the Sinner's Prayer: People's Experiences with "Stranger-Evangelism"

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Abstract

While churches and Christian concerts are typical loci for evangelism, some Christians also broach the subject of faith with strangers they encounter at their health club, at the beach, or while visiting door-to-door. This study draws from 34 stories of "stranger-evangelism" offered by 11 ministers and laypeople who participated in semi-structured interviews. The central finding of this study is that stranger-evangelism contains a rich variety of experiences that are typical of any ministry: sometimes planned (by proclaiming, inviting, programming, befriending, and serving), and sometimes spontaneously. Participants described the fruit of their efforts along a continuum from rejection to interest, and even to conversion. This article discusses the findings in light of scholarship on breaching social norms and addressing power differentials.

Keywords: evangelism, stranger, ethics, qualitative research, norm expectancy.

Introduction

In 1988, a Vietnam veteran named Bob Wieland spoke to a crowded church in Southern California from his wheelchair. He recounted how he lost his legs after stepping on a mortar round. During his road to recovery, he gained the strength to bench press over 300 pounds, and also found Jesus Christ. He gained notoriety as he completed a three-and-a-half year “Walk for Hunger” (on his hands) across the USA (Skidmore, 1986). Wieland’s talk that evening in church ended with a plea for the crowd – many who were strangers to him – to follow Christ. “The journey with Christ begins with your first step. All who would take that step now, stand up and come down the aisle.” I walked toward the altar, not too sure what it would mean.

Since then, I have engaged in my own efforts to share Christ with strangers: sometimes through preaching (as Wieland did), sometimes with complete strangers (as part of Cru while in college), and more recently as a missionary in the South Pacific. Even after more than 25 years in the ministry, I am still petrified to approach a stranger to talk about Jesus Christ. I became curious about how laypeople, missionaries, and pastors are able to engage in this special type of ministry. Therefore, I designed this research study to understand people’s experiences with stranger-evangelism.

Literature on Stranger-Evangelism

Numerous biblical scholars have explicated the mandate to be involved in evangelism (Saxton, 2017, pp. 73-85). Theologians have noted that evangelism is important for the sake of the Christian’s personal growth (Beougher, 2005, p. 121), for the health of the church (Grudem, 1994, p. 868), and, of course, for those who are in danger of hell (Coleman, 1993, p. 94, cf. Saxton 2017).

Much of the literature on evangelism has focused on what Simpson (2003) called “permission evangelism.” This includes the “lifestyle evangelism” approach that received much attention during the 1980s (Aldrich, 1983; Moody, 1983). Lifestyle evangelism involves befriending people to the point where the Christian earns an opportunity to share his or her faith journey. Permission evangelism also includes what Johnston (2007) described as “preaching evangelism,” where the gospel is presented to people who have elected to come to church.

Another form of permission evangelism is “stadium evangelism” in which the evangelist has implicit permission to share the gospel because people have responded to an invitation (often by their Christian friends)

to attend the event. Three empirical studies have been done on "stadium evangelism." First, Whitam (1966) used a decision-making framework to understand teens' responses to messages at evangelistic crusades. Schmidt (1990) collected data after a Luis Palau event, and while the sample size was small ($N = 60$), the statistics gathered were fascinating: Megachurches had a greater advantage over smaller churches in assimilating newcomers who attended the stadium event; the number of baptisms within six months was small, (but still impressive) at 1.5%. Participants said the main strength of the event was mobilizing volunteers in their church; the main weakness was (not surprisingly) follow-up with those who made professions of faith. In the third study, Abrahamse (2021) used linguistic analysis to demonstrate that Dutch media has shifted from skepticism to a more favorable view of Billy Graham's stadium events.

Far less research has been done on "stranger-evangelism"—where the herald often transgresses a social boundary to start a religious conversation with a stranger. Of twelve dissertations related to Cru, none describes the experiences of people who are engaged in this sort of evangelism—not from the perspective of the evangelist nor from that of the "evangelee." Additionally, very little research has been done on people's experiences with planned stranger-evangelism (e.g., door-to-door or beach campaigns) or spontaneous stranger-evangelism (e.g., on an airplane or in the fitness center).

Delineating Stranger-Evangelism

The approach I have termed stranger-evangelism often involves what Cru founder Bill Bright called "aggressive evangelism" (Ingram, 1989, p. 17). Evangelism is "aggressive" when the herald quickly moves to a gospel presentation, even before the evangelee may show interest in the topic. Acts 5:42 describes how the apostles regularly engaged in this highly persuasion-focused approach: "Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah" (NIV).

Stranger-evangelism also involves what Smith (2011), the developer of the "Training for Trainers" model, referred to as "indiscriminate sowing." By this, Smith means we should share the gospel "with everybody, because you never know whom God will choose" (p. 96) to be saved.

Not all evangelism is aggressive or indiscriminate. Yet aggressive stranger-evangelism may be the archetype of the term "evangelism" for many Christians. Johnston's (2007) comprehensive taxonomy of Christian terms explains that some people narrowly use the term "evangelism" to *always* mean sharing the gospel with strangers, and

believe it *always* includes an appeal for repentance (pp. 38-39). Johnston avers that the church is not in agreement on whether all Christians should be engaged in this form of proclamation, or whether it is a task set aside for those who expressly have the gift of evangelism.

This brief review of the literature forms the background for my study. How do Christians who engage in stranger-evangelism overcome the social awkwardness? When they do have a moment of the stranger's time, how do they use that time? What is the mark of success or failure for such encounters? Below I describe my methods for researching this study. Then I describe the findings and discuss the results in light of the literature on the social and spiritual aspects of stranger-evangelism.

Methods

The purpose of this descriptive qualitative study was to understand people's experiences with stranger-evangelism. I used purposive sampling to recruit participants who indicated they had experience doing evangelism with strangers. I interviewed 11 people about their regular habits of evangelism which elicited 34 concrete examples of times that they had shared the gospel with a stranger. Table 1 gives more information on the participants.

Table 1: *Participants*

Pseudonym	Occupation
Andrea	Bible translator
Pastor Barry	Pastor of a suburban Southern California church
Pastor Jake	Director of a Christian non-profit, missionary, pastor
Janice	Missionary focusing on evangelism
JB	Author, ministry leader, pastor, evangelist
Kathi	Homemaker
Mary	Healthcare professional
Mike	Entrepreneur
Pastor Ronnie	Pastor of a Mid-Western church
Pastor Steve	Carpenter, pastoral staff at an urban Southern California church
Ted	Missionary mobilizer

I am admittedly an "insider" when it comes to the subject of this research, and I shared a bit of my insider bias at the beginning of this article (namely, that I am simultaneously supportive of and fearful of stranger-evangelism). Methodologists have suggested that insider researchers can mitigate their own biases by having prolonged interviews with multiple

participants (Berger, 2013). Therefore, I conducted open-ended, semi-structured interviews to hear participants' own experiences with stranger-evangelism. I transcribed and coded the data in Dedoose software – first at the thought-by-thought level to generate “initial codes,” and then at the thematic level (Saldaña, 2015). These thematic codes helped form the answer to the research question. Finally, I carried out “member checks” (Birt, et al., 2016) by sharing the themes with five participants to ensure that my interpretation of the data was aligned with their actual experiences of stranger-evangelism

Findings

The central finding of this study is that stranger-evangelism contains a rich variety of experiences that are typical of any ministry: sometimes planned (by proclaiming, inviting, programming, befriending, and serving), and sometimes spontaneously. Each of these terms will be discussed below. The fruit of such interactions is as variegated as the fruits of any Christian ministry, ranging from rejection to interest, and even to conversion. I will describe the variety of this richness of this ministry effort below. But first I must revisit the terms “stranger” and “evangelism” in light of participant data.

Defining the Stranger

In many cases, the stranger is not only someone who is unknown, but who is socio-culturally different than the evangelist. Mike (who serves food to the homeless every week) told me, “The people in my neighborhood with jobs and homes don't want to hear about the gospel.” In contrast, the homeless are willing to talk about it “because they've all been broken.”

Janice explained that “it pays to look like an East Asian sometimes” at her college campus because some students from the Middle East are “so interested in K-Pop or anything Korean or Japanese” that they will strike up a conversation. And a missionary in Southeast Asia leverages her own “difference” to befriend strangers and start religious conversations on the campus. “I ask people about their hijab or bindi dots. I explain that I have not met many Muslims or Hindus.” She noted that a Christian in her host country found that leveraging “difference” may work for missionaries, but not for national Christians:

She told me, “That's easier for you, because you're a foreigner, and genuinely don't know these things. People know that we [nationals] already know what the hijab is or what the bindi dot is, so it's harder for us to start conversations.”

Not all stranger-evangelism involves socio-cultural difference. Participants described sharing the gospel at health clubs, restaurants, and in their own neighborhoods, regardless of any differences. The commonality is that all participants had approached people who were unknown to them. “It’s hardest to evangelize your own family,” Mary told me.

Note that for participants, “stranger” is ideally a temporary status. A missionary challenged me about the use of the term, “At what point does the stranger become a friend?” This desire to move someone from “stranger” to “friend” was shared by multiple participants (as I show throughout the findings section). Whether participants engage in scheduled or spontaneous encounters – and regardless of whether they are befriending, proclaiming, inviting, outreaching, or serving – their hope is that the first interaction will result in a deeper relationship that would result in conversion and discipleship.

Defining Evangelism

As the central finding of this study indicates, evangelism is a fairly fluid term for participants. The actions they described as “stranger-evangelism” involve praying for others and meeting their needs, as well as explaining the core tenets of the Christian faith. (The richness of these actions will be developed throughout the findings section). I was surprised, though, that only three participants in this study explicitly explained to me the kerygma of the gospel as they described “evangelism.” For all of these three, the gospel involves confessing a belief in the substitutionary atonement and repenting from sins, with the result of being born again (see John 3:1-21).

Additionally, some people are fluent in multiple types of stranger-evangelism: Pastor Barry and Pastor Ronnie both participate in door-to-door efforts as well as spontaneous evangelistic encounters at the gym. Mike and Kathi pray for people, hand out food, and lead Bible studies in the park.

Motivations for Stranger-Evangelism

Nine of the eleven participants expressly described the awkwardness of approaching strangers to talk about faith. Pastor Jake recognized his efforts on the beach interrupt people’s plans; Pastor Barry empathized with those who are less than pleased to have someone come to the door on a Saturday morning. What motivates people to overcome the awkwardness, in an attempt to reach strangers?

Pastor Barry talked to me about motivation:

We have one big, imposing guy on the team. He says, “I know nobody

wants to see me on their doorstep. But Jesus saved me. Someone told me about Jesus. And now I've told everyone in my circle. I need to get to a fresh pond."

Ted has a similar sense of paying it forward. He recalls a friend in college who shared the gospel with him. "I'd love to do that for someone else...to go out of my comfort zone to do that...It seems like the Holy Spirit could do a lot."

Mike, an entrepreneur in Florida, was motivated by a supernatural calling. "I was out on a walk praying for my neighborhood. I prayed, 'Lord, send workers.' And God said, 'What about you?' So I started giving out food and sharing the gospel."

Steve described his motivation: "People are separated from God...so I try to shrink that gap...so they can see God is desirable. He's after them." Similarly, Pastor Jake is motivated to warn people about the peril of eternal punishment. He explained:

People around us that we interact with every day are going to hell without the gospel. If I knew they were walking into a building that was on fire, I would do everything I could to stop them from going in.

Jake then invited me to join him on Tuesdays, to overcome my own trepidation of stranger-evangelism.

The Planned Context

As I indicated above, participants' encounters are sometimes planned, and sometimes spontaneous. They described five different types of planned stranger-evangelism: proclaiming, inviting, programming, befriending, and serving. I will discuss each below.

Planned Proclamation

Some participants go to specific venues on a schedule to expressly preach a message about salvation. They have developed strategies for reducing awkwardness and for broaching the topic of faith.

Ted described what may be the quintessential example of planned proclamation: He spent a summer doing "open-air evangelism." His team performed skits in a park to gather a crowd. Then a speaker would share the gospel. Ted did not see much fruit. "People would laugh and smile; but there were very few conversations."

Pastor Jake takes a team each Tuesday night to the pier to explain the path of salvation. He approaches strangers with the prop of a "curved

illusion” from Living Waters Ministry:

Then I say something like, “Hey, I have a question for you guys: Which one of these items looks bigger?” It breaks the tension of “I’m a complete stranger and I’m talking to you.” Then I say, “Hey, do you guys go to church?” That starts the conversation. It turns to sharing the gospel from there.

Jake also hands out Starbucks cards in order to start conversations. “I don’t give a gospel tract and that’s it. I want to engage people. I say, “There’s a gospel message in there. Do you go to church?” If he gets a hearing, Jake spends a great deal of time on the concept of sin, and he explains judicial atonement. “It’s about getting to the conscience and letting the Holy Spirit...it’s not about apologetics.” He recounted,

You can see the moment when the Spirit convicts them.... The goal isn’t the sinner’s prayer. That’s not in Scripture. The goal is repentance. Someone says, “I’m a sinner and I need repentance.” So, I walk them through what it means to be sorrowful, to do a U-turn.

Jake is confident that handing out tracts can be efficacious even if people show no initial interest. “I’ve heard about people who get a gospel tract, throw it in a drawer, and read it six months later, and that’s when it hits them.”

JB, a prominent church leader in a World class city, spent over twenty years sending out 25 to 50 people each weekend in teams. He modeled his ministry after the evangelist Arthur Blessitt, encouraging the teams to ask people about their eternal destiny:

It wasn’t hard to give a tract; but if they would slow down, we would say, “Can I ask you a question? If you died tonight, do you know that God would let you into heaven?” One out of ten would stop, and one out of ten who stopped would listen.

Planned Invitations

Ten of the eleven participants use invitations as a way of beginning a conversation and then move on to proclamation if the evangelee shows interest. This approach includes inviting people to attend an event or inviting them to pray.

Inviting is less threatening than proclaiming, making the planned invitational approach more accessible to budding evangelists. To those who are too timid to talk, Barry says, “Stand at a respectful distance and

just pray." The evangelism teams also have room for those who are too timid for going door-to-door at all:

If knocking on a stranger's door is just way too much, we have them set up at a park or on a trail, and smile at people. And if somebody smiles back, we say, "Just take the low-hanging fruit." For some, that is a lot more doable.

Barry's team is self-conscious that knocking on doors can inconvenience the residents. His team always "starts with an apology: "Thanks for opening your door."

"If you ask people, 'Do you have time to talk, they will say 'no.' So don't ask. That's just a tip," Janice explained to me. Instead, her team in Japan invites people to fill out surveys on their beliefs. The team also hands out energy bars to attract people and invites passersby to Christian events. In Ireland, Ted's team went door-to-door to invite people to an event at the local hotel where there would be an evangelistic event. "I don't think I saw anyone accept the Lord at the doorstep, but at the film, we saw two become Christians. They joined a local church and are believers to this day."

Barry's door-to-door team often involves an invitation for prayer.

We ask, "Do you have anything going on in your life that you would like prayer for?" Often, they say, "No, we're fine. Thank you..." And maybe 15 or 20% of people say, "Well how nice, Yeah, I do need prayer." Generally speaking, the people with whom we have good engagement are those who are having some kind of catastrophic need: "I just got a cancer diagnosis," "I'm going through a tough divorce." Or something like that.

This sort of invitational ministry also involves inviting people to read literature. Barry explained, "We offer – always *offer*, never *tell* – *offer* to give them a tract or a gospel of John. And if they're interested, we give them my business card." A typical response is, "I'll take what you have, but I don't want to talk." One man even said, "Get away from me." And another, "I don't want to hear it." Barry said these responses are, "not a big deal. We say, 'Thank you for your time' and we move on."

Barry also explained that the planned invitational approach may also involve making people aware of support groups at the church, such as divorce care, addiction recovery, and grief support. He told me,

We offered one man prayer, and he said, "I'm three days sober." We

said “Good news. We have a Wednesday night group with a bunch of sober alcoholics. We’ve seen Jesus do amazing things.

Planned Programming

Pastor Ronnie is “by nature an introvert” and found it “horrifying” to do door-to-door evangelism because he knew he “would not come to the Lord by someone coming to the door.” However, Ronnie went on to describe multiple ways he has shared the gospel with strangers –largely through scheduled programs in the community.

Nearly a thousand people come each week to the basketball outreach that Ronnie’s church holds in an underserved community. Ronnie described these as “front porch” ministries, because “only 10% are part of the church.” The ministry team teaches basketball techniques, as well as biblical principles of sportsmanship. Then the coaches extend invitations to church. Ronnie said, “Several families have come to the basketball outreach and eventually ended up becoming part of the church.”

Ronnie’s church also holds block parties on public school campuses throughout the summer. “We live in a part of the country where faith and school are not compartmentalized,” he explained. At the parties, they invite people to men’s and women’s ministries, and they disseminate Christian literature.

Planned Befriending

Two participants deliberately schedule a time to initiate friendships with strangers, in the hopes of witnessing. Janice, in Southeast Asia, explained that her long-term strategy on campus is to widen her network of friends. As Pastor Barry described above, sometimes evangelists “need more fish in the pond.”

As with the planned invitations and planned programming approaches above, the planned-befriending approach takes the pressure off of budding evangelists. Janice tells new missionaries, “You don’t have to share the gospel the first time. Just make a friend.” In fact, this may be the perfect approach for more timid people. Janice theorized, “Introverts can have deeper conversations with people.”

Planned befriending is one of the only viable approaches for Janice’s context, as proselytism is highly discouraged in her host country. In fact, her organization is not permitted to work on campuses, “So you need to just make friends...Is this someone you can invest in - get to know...where are their interests?” Janice believes this approach is far more effective than randomly approaching people with a gospel presentation. She describes her model as “hands-free” evangelism: There is no Gospel app and no tracts.

They just have "normal conversations...I just want to talk to people."

Ronnie described his planned befriending at the gym, where people can be a sort of "captive audience." "Most of the conversations are about lifting weights," but he tries to initiate conversations about "having peace in your life." He told me, "Most of these conversations are one-sided, with me talking." But then Ronnie described a rich dialog with a man who enjoyed Russian literature, as Ronnie does. The fact that the Russian authors touched on themes of Christianity seemed like an in-road. "The conversation ended up lasting over seven months. He started asking questions." Eventually, the man visited a church in his area.

Planned Service

Five participants described a regularly scheduled ministry of serving the less fortunate in hopes of starting conversations about Christianity.

Mike and Kathi's ministry began when they gave a McDonald's meal to a homeless man by a bridge in a coastal Florida town. Mike then asked him if he went to church and handed him a tract. "Then it became five. Then ten," Mike recalled. "So, my wife started cooking." They now serve 200 meals a week out of their SUV. Kathi explained the people's need for this sort of help: "Some of the people we serve are felons and can't work. One had even murdered someone."

The couple takes four church members at a time to the homeless in the city. The team starts with a question: "Hey do you want some coffee?" Then they ask, "Are you a Christian? We're Christians." They read the literature along with their audience, "so they don't stick it in their pocket and forget about it." Then they offer to pray. In fact, Kathi said one man told her, "Don't let your husband leave. I need prayer." Mike said he delivers a "sermon in a second: 'God loves you; he wants to hear from you; he has a plan for you.'" The couple now holds Bible studies at the marina park. They are currently in the fifth chapter of John.

Pastor Barry and Pastor Jake both lead door-to-door teams in less fortunate neighborhoods. They ask, "Is there anything you need. Do you need groceries?" They also invite the families to church. Barry, who lived much of his life in Mexico, explained, "The only people who regularly decline to talk to us or to take our literature are those who don't speak English."

The Spontaneous Context

In addition to the five scheduled evangelism models above, participants described many spontaneous experiences where their witness included praying, inviting, proclaiming, befriending, or serving.

In preparation for our interview, Andrea (a Bible translator) told me

she had multiple examples of spontaneous evangelism:

The lady in the cave, the man on the airplane, the prisoner in the jail, the mom in spinning class, the lady at the Alpha course, the linguist, the pregnant lady, the rude man in the McDonalds, the elite professional from a world religion, the man from a restricted country who wanted the Bible, and the Peace Corps worker... and of all those, only two came to Christ. But I feel strongly about witnessing to strangers.

Andrea told me about one who came to Christ. She was in a spinning class and mentioned she was a missionary. A woman there retorted, "What about me, who will tell me about Jesus?" Andrea discovered that this woman had a great deal of pain in her life. She later looked up the woman's address and wrote her a letter outlining the good news of Jesus Christ. "I explained the gospel. I didn't hear back; but I came across her a couple of years later, sitting in a coffee shop, memorizing scriptures." They keep in touch.

Mary said she had a "boring life" being raised Christian. She asked God for her life to have a "good story." And she ended up being involved in a landmark adoption case. She now uses that story to segue into the topic that's "all in the Bible: the story about being adopted into God's family." Mary told me that a reporter from Italy said he had never heard of the notion that God adopts all of us, and he asked for her to send him all the scriptures on the subject.

JB, who systematically does proclamation ministry, also has many examples of spontaneous evangelism. Recently, he asked his waitress, "Can I pray for you?" "If they take the opportunity, I then ask them, 'Do you know for sure if you died today that you would go to heaven?'"

Steve was a union carpenter for more than thirty years and would receive new apprentices regularly. Here was his approach:

I would ask, What is their life like? What are they attracted to? You'll hear in those stories, what they're hoping for. You're listening for dreams. What is a common ground where I can build trust...So I tune my heart to that, and the Spirit will say, "Ask them about that."

Steve specifically told me about one of his apprentices. "After a number of life experiences... two years later, he came to faith."

The Fruit of Stranger-Evangelism

The central finding of this study is that stranger evangelism contains a rich variety of experiences that are typical of any ministry. I was surprised that

participants do not monolithically conceptualize a "successful" evangelistic encounter as one that results in conversion. Participants are thrilled to be involved in any type of ministry to strangers. Barry told me, "We have never had an outing event where we didn't have at least one very positive experience." However, participants did describe a continuum of results, from rejection to interest, to conversion.

Rejection

Eight participants described experiences with rejection. Andrea mentioned that telling people she is in ministry opens opportunities to talk about religion; however, "It can also be a shutdown. I can't tell you how many people have turned away from me in the airplane when they find out what I do."

Ronnie's Bible college required door-to-door ministry. Students would return to campus to provide numbers of converts. But Ronnie referred to this portion as a "walk of shame," because, "My tally was always zero...Nobody said 'I'd like to hear more.'"

As Barry was at the gym, he engaged a man in a conversation about Jesus. "Then the man blurted out, 'People keep telling me Jesus died for my sins, but who the blankety-blank asked him to?'"

Another form of rejection involves turning-the-tables. Janice explained that sometimes starting religious conversations with Muslims has resulted in them trying to convert her. She gave a concrete example of a student from Egypt.

Three participants explained how they politely find a "way out" when they receive a negative response. Here is Jake's description:

It's understanding non-verbal cues. One kid pretended to be talking on the phone [to avoid having to talk to Jake]. I said, "I'm not going to push you – if you want to read this tract later, go ahead and read it." And most people will see that I'm being respectful and will say, "Yeah, I'll read it."

Interest

People often appreciate the invitation for prayer. Barry says people "are surprised anyone is out canvassing, offering prayer.... They are not interested in an unsolicited message, but are interested in having someone ask, 'Is there anything going on in your life that we can pray for?'" A prostitute in Florida embraced Kathi and said, "I want you to hug me because you showed me true love."

Invitations to church also result in people showing interest. For

example, Mike and Kathi reported that two of the street people to whom they ministered have shown up to church.

Profession of Faith

Some participants could describe specific examples of conversions as a result of their stranger-evangelism. Jake recalled how he spent half an hour with a group of teens:

One of them felt convicted of sin and started to tear up. He said, “My gosh, if this is true, I’m in trouble.” Some of his buddies were like, “This is true, man, come to church with us.” He said, “I don’t want to be that way anymore.”

Jake described how the young man prayed to confess Christ. Jake gave him a Bible and recommended a church in the area.

While Andrea was on a Teen Missions trip in England, she met a woman who was researching religions. The woman attended one of the events and took notes on the message. She told Andrea, “That’s it, I accept this. I believe it. I want to be a Christian.” Andrea kept in touch with her for the past 20 years. “She led her family and others to Christ.”

Over a thousand people prayed to receive the Lord due to JB’s metropolitan ministry. “I can’t be sure that they were all converted but some were. One went into the Anglican ministry.” JB described a woman from Moscow who prayed to receive the Lord, came back months later with “10 or 12 more friends from Russia,” and six prayed to receive Christ. “I kept in touch with that woman for years. She was definitely converted.”

Ronnie has seen two prostitutes from the neighborhood come to their church over the years. “One leads one of the women’s ministries now.”

Blessings for the Evangelist

Stranger-evangelism also results in blessings for the heralds themselves. Barry referred to his small team that continues to do door-to-door visits. “They haven’t been as discouraged as you might think.” In fact, Barry believes God has blessed his church for making the effort. “You go to forty doors, strike out every time; then on Tuesday God sends you someone you never thought would come to your office, and you lead him to Christ.”

JB expressed the same sentiment: “God has blessed our church because we were unashamed to bring the gospel to the streets.”

Such ministry can be contagious. Mike explained that his initiative inspired others in his congregation to start similar ministries.

Discussion and Implications

Below I will discuss how participants' experiences relate to the biblical and scholarly literature on befriending, overcoming awkwardness, the power differential, and the impact on the herald.

Befriending

The participants were not monolithically taking on the role of herald. In addition to servants, some were genuinely interested in befriending people, and in understanding their religious backgrounds. Vanderwerf (2018) surveyed Minnesota poker players to understand their experiences with evangelism. In contrast to the "transactional" approach (where churches offer a free event for the community in exchange for an opportunity to present the gospel), he suggests (based on participant data) that Christians engage in "learner evangelism." Genuinely asking about another's faith can lead to rich conversations. Camphouse (2010) uses a similar moniker, "listening-based evangelism," that also involves a humble bid toward understanding the other.

Researchers should design quantitative studies from the perspective of the recipients of evangelism, to see how they perceive befriending differing from door-to-door efforts.

Overcoming Awkwardness

Approaching strangers to talk about Jesus can be socially awkward. Participants described disrupting people's dates at the beach, their weekend plans, or their personal space. Goffman (1971) referred to these sorts of disruptions as invasions of the "territories of the self." Specifically, talking with strangers about their religious views invades their personal space and the right to control conversation and information (Ingram, 1989, p. 20). Communication theorists refer to this breach of boundaries as a "norm expectancy violation" (Burgoon & Jones, 1976). Socially "normal" people would not deliberately invade another person's space — as it would dishonor the other. However, participants' descriptions above indicate that many of their encounters — whether spontaneous or planned — cannot be "intrusive" (to use Ingram's term above) if the Holy Spirit planned such meetings. Several authors have noted that heralds trust that it is the Holy Spirit — not the evangelist — who transgresses "territories of the self" to reveal God to people through evangelistic encounters (Ingram, 1989, p. 21; Smith, 2011, p. 96).

Many evangelistic ministries have worked out strategies to overcome the awkwardness: Asking people to participate in surveys, handing out candy bars or tracts, inviting people to events, and even offering prayer are

all less threatening acts than approaching people to ask about their religious beliefs. Ingram's (1989) discussion of Cru's strategies made a similar point: Public activities that are more familiar (like surveys) can be a bridge to the more awkward activity of witnessing (p. 22).

Participants have also discovered that they invade fewer "territories of the self" if they approach strangers in a "third place" (Oldenburg, 1989) where they, and the evangelee, belong. Third places are where people spend time between home (their "first place") and work (their "second place"). Such places include health clubs, campuses, and parks — the sorts of places where participants said they engaged in planned and spontaneous evangelism.

Not all participants showed the same degree of emotional intelligence when it comes to overcoming awkwardness. Some clearly knew stranger-evangelism is invasive, and they had strategies for mitigating the awkwardness. Others did not address the issue. Further research is needed to see if self-confidence and emotional intelligence are correlated with engagement in stranger evangelism. Dunaetz (2019) has noted that Christians may shy away from sharing the gospel due to the "mum effect" — a fear of the consequences of sharing news that may be received harshly. He suggests that while all church members may be fit for engaging in outreach, the task of evangelism may be more suitable for those who can navigate the mum effect with finesse. In any case, evangelistic ministries would benefit from debriefing all their workers on the ways they experienced (and overcame) awkwardness.

It would be helpful to have a longitudinal study on people's perceptions of "being witnessed to" to see how attitudes are changing. Such knowledge could shape further efforts in stranger-evangelism.

Mitigating the Power Differential

Participants clearly want all "strangers" to know about Jesus Christ. Many, though, often discuss matters of faith with those who are not only strangers but are different from themselves (participants discussed reaching poorer communities, youth, the homeless, and those who are from ethnic backgrounds other than their own). Some recognized that being "different" helps catch others' attention. But in many of these cases, "difference" also involved a power differential (e.g., participants may be older or far wealthier than those they are trying to reach).

Ethicist Elmer Thiessen (2018) noted that when evangelism involves a power differential, the act may not only transgress social boundaries but ethical ones. For example, some see it as emotionally manipulative for youth leaders to persuade young people to be baptized on the last night of

a youth retreat, for a teacher in a public school to use classroom time to defend the Christian faith, or for church planters in the least developed countries to "buy converts" with gifts of rice. Thiessen does not wish for Christians to cease their work of evangelism; rather, he encourages evangelists to plan out their interactions in a way that allows for individuals' autonomy in how they will respond.

Evangelicals seem to be shifting away from evangelism, at least partially due to concerns about the ethics of persuading people to convert. Whereas 96% of millennial Christians agreed or strongly agreed that "part of my faith means being a witness about Jesus," 47% agreed or strongly agreed that "it is wrong to share one's personal beliefs with someone of a different faith in hopes that they will" convert (Barna Group, 2019, p. 47).

Several participants were clearly aware of the importance of "autonomy." They politely found "an out" when their audience was uninterested. They also described "dropping the bait." If their audience did not take the bait, they often did not push the topic. There is strong scriptural support for this posture toward the other. While Jesus was confrontational at times (Luke 11:37-54), when he was specifically engaged in ministry, he paid attention to the needs and interests of those he was serving. For example, he asked Bartimaeus, "What do you want me to do for you?" (Mark 10:51, NIV). He responded to Jairus' need (Mark 5:21-43), and he allowed the rich young ruler to walk away (Mark 10:27-27).

Stranger-evangelism raises not only ethical issues but also legal ones. The participant who worked in a Southeast Asian country could only engage in "planned-befriending" evangelism. There are also potential legal issues in the USA. For example, when the Todd Becker Foundation was planning a rally on drunk driving, word got out that the organization would end the evening with an altar call. Boston (2010) referred to this bait-and-switch tactic as "Stealth evangelism." The civil rights group Americans United put pressure on the local school district to make sure no religious conversionary talk would be involved.

Overt evangelism among strangers is foundational to a sense of religious freedom in the USA. The Supreme Court heard a case from Ohio on "doorbell evangelism" and determined that the right must be protected as part of free speech ("Doorbell evangelism," 2002). But Christians also engage in evangelism in many countries where they are not legally allowed to initiate conversionary conversations with strangers.

Impact on the Herald

The impact of stranger-evangelism on the spiritual lives of the evangelists was a minor focus in this study. Ko (2015) predicted the effect that cold-

call evangelism would have on the team that engages in such a work. He said it would increase one's prayer life, make one more attuned to the needs of others, and may even result in conversions.

Scripture teaches that proclamation is a spiritual activity—one where the Triune God infills the herald. We experience God's presence and assistance as we declare what God has done (Luke 12:12; John 14:26; Rom. 8:26).

The findings section explained that stranger-evangelism efforts can be "contagious." Such innovation in lay ministry was the theme of Greear's (2016) *Gaining by Losing*. He argues that the church exists to help people discover their gifts and passions, and to empower them to use those gifts in their communities.

Conclusion

Stranger-evangelism is alive and well. Yet it cannot be reductionistically characterized by the trope of two nicely dressed people knocking on doors in an effort to persuade people to convert. Table 2 below shows the richness of ministries that Christians are engaging in with strangers.

Table 2: *Types of Stranger-Evangelism*

Planned Proclamation	Approach: A "hook" (tracts, candy bars, Starbucks cards, an optical illusion, a quick survey) Action: Explaining the problem of sin and the good news of the judicial atonement
Planned Invitations	Approach: Apology for the inconvenience Action: Offering prayer, tangible needs, invitation to church or church's ministries
Planned Programming	Approach: Community program (basketball, block parties, after school programs) Action: Invitation to church's ministries; offering literature
Planned befriending	Approach: A bid to know the other (coffee, party, camp, survey) Action: Willingness to understand the other's interests and beliefs; movement at their pace
Planned Service	Approach: Tangible needs (food for the homeless, etc.) Action: Invitation to church, Bible study
Spontaneous Stranger-Evangelism	Approach: Listening to the other Action: Responding to the other's need with prayer, encouragement, or literature

Understanding the multiple approaches above has helped to mitigate some of my own fears of stranger-evangelism. Because it is a ministry that

includes a rich set of approaches and actions, there seems to be space for all Christians to get involved.

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