

# The Kingdom Builder

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# 1. The Kingdom Builder

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Throughout Scripture God is presented in many ways. He is Holy. He is the Lord Almighty, He is Light. He is the Rock. He is a Fortress. He is the great 'I am,' (the one who is and will be). He is the Deliverer and Saviour. He is the Shepherd. He is a Shield. He is the Ancient of Days, and so on. But he is also described as a builder, or in the modern vernacular, something of a property developer. God is building – constructing a kingdom – a kingdom that has no end.

The project has been underway for quite some time. In fact, we can rightly say that the diagrams have been on the drawing board from all eternity. The preparation of the site – the ground-works – however, began at the same time as the fall of man in Genesis 3. Even as he cursed both Adam and Eve for their blatant rebellion, he also cursed and announced the destruction of the devil, the architect of the rebellion.

Genesis 3:15

And I will put enmity between you and the woman and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.

God is building and he promises to send someone, a descendant of Eve who will ultimately crush the evil one. God is building, and here, in this verse, he is laying the foundation – the cornerstone – of his kingdom.

If God is the builder, then the devil is the saboteur or vandal who has made it his business to slow down and even stop the construction. He will strike at the heel – go for the Achilles tendon, so to speak. He will seek to halt the delivery of materials, to incite legal proceedings, to injure the workers, to get them to go out on strike, to cause minor collapses, to confuse and confound the engineers by convincing them that the drawings are wrong. He will distort, alter, misrepresent, disfigure, demolish, extinguish and devastate wherever and whenever he can. His ultimate aim is to have the whole site shut down permanently. But God is building his kingdom, and nothing can stop its progress!

In response to God's claim of absolute authority over all things, Job replied –

Job 42:2

I know that you can do all things; no plan of yours can be thwarted.

And this includes the building of His kingdom. As the biblical witness unfolds, God continues to reveal himself as the great builder as he makes a series of promises to Abraham in Genesis 12. The writer of Hebrews comments on the impact those promises had on the patriarch when he writes –

Hebrews 11:10

...he (Abraham) was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God

God had promised to make a great nation from Abraham, that his name would be great, that he would be a blessing to the whole world and that his offspring would possess the land of Canaan (Gen 12:1-3, 7).

Abraham and his family were nomads who dwelt in tents, and thus, this great patriarch was anticipating a time, whether he knew it or not, where the absolute fulfillment of at least some of the promises would ultimately trickle down to his descendants. It would be with future generations that the quantum transition from tents to bricks and mortar – an actual city or kingdom – would be established.<sup>1</sup> Abraham's expectations were of a physical kingdom with a geographical location – albeit standing on a spiritual platform where God was envisaged as the eternal king, architect and builder. But this picture was only a shadow of future events. God would use Abraham's descendants, the people of Israel, as a model of salvation – a foreshadow of a much greater work to come.

Some five to six hundred years after Abraham, his descendants (several million by this stage) were saved by God from slavery in Egypt through Moses in order to continue to fulfill the aforementioned promises.

#### Hebrews 3:4-6

...every house is built by someone, but God is the builder of everything. Moses was faithful as a servant in all God's house, testifying to what would be said in the future. But Christ is faithful as a Son over God's house. And we are his house, if we hold on to our courage and the hope of which we boast.

Moses was a servant in God's house (as Abraham had been over half a millennium earlier). He was the custodian of Israel as they made their way from Egypt to the threshold of the Promised Land. But Christ is the head over the house and ultimately, all that God did with Israel was in preparation for his coming. Thus the promise to Abraham of being a blessing to the rest of the world (Gen 12:3) finds its fulfillment in Christ. And we who accept his Lordship are his house, or as Peter puts it –

#### 1 Peter 2:5

...you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

And of Christ he adds –

#### 1 Peter 2:6, 7b

For in Scripture it says: 'See, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame.'<sup>2</sup>... The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone.<sup>3</sup>

We are the kingdom that God is building (and has been building) and Jesus is both the foundation (the cornerstone) and the crowning achievement (the capstone) of the kingdom.

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<sup>1</sup> TNTC, Hebrews, IVP, Leicester, England, 1983, D. Guthrie, p232.

<sup>2</sup> Isaiah 28:16

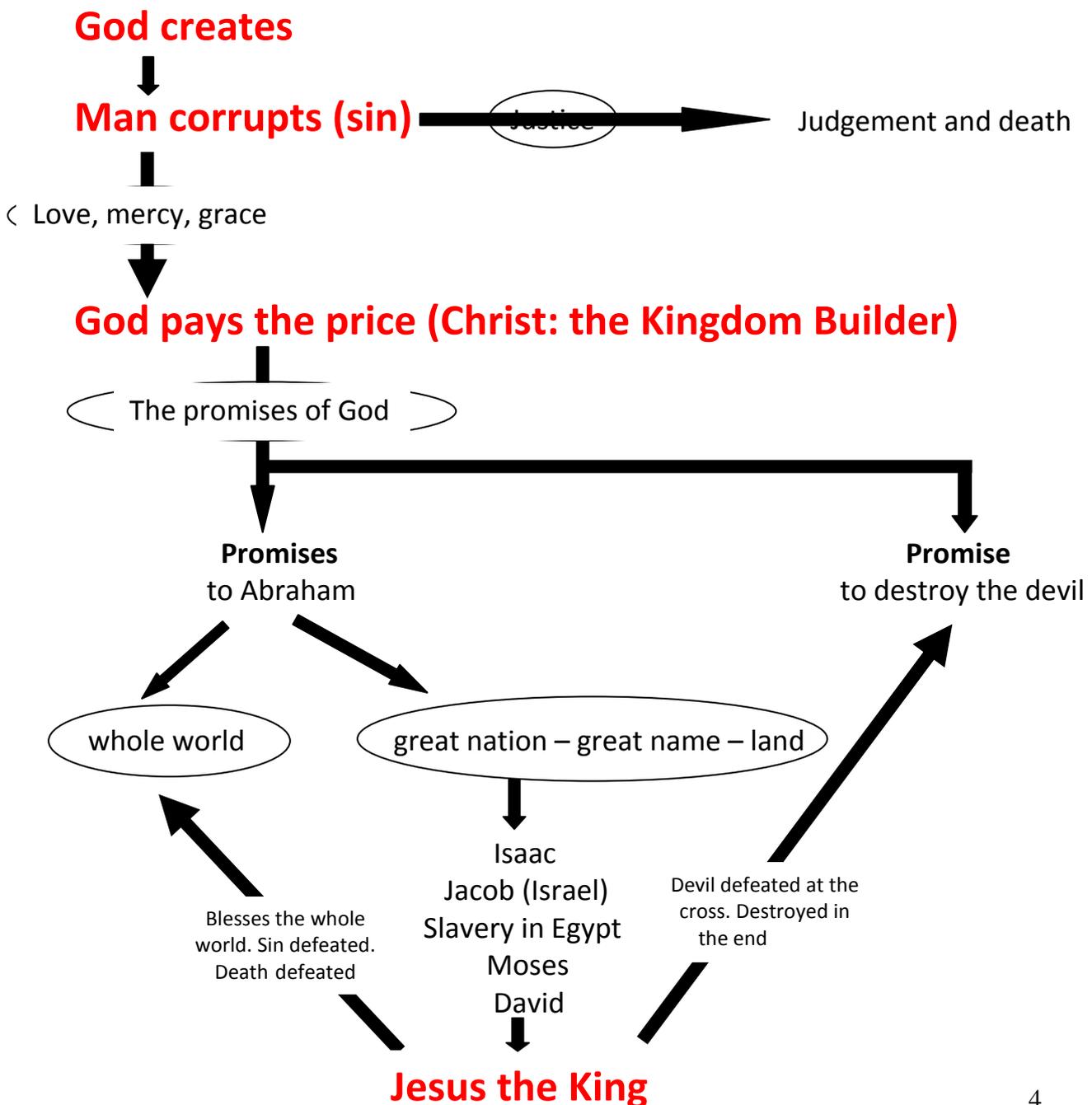
<sup>3</sup> Psalm 118:22

Three hundred years or so following Moses' ministry in God's house, God continued to build. David, described as a man after God's own heart, prepared to build the first temple in Jerusalem, but God said no, for he had reserved that task for Solomon. God quizzes him, 'So you want to build me a house David? How about I build you a house instead?' And what God had in mind was a dynasty of which Jesus would be the last and greatest to sit on the throne. God said to David through the prophet Nathan

2 Samuel 7:11b,16

The Lord declares to you that the Lord himself will establish a house for you... Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever.

The house – the kingdom – that God intended for David would be established and endure forever. This is just another phase of construction, for we know David's throne is really Christ's throne. God is building his kingdom – an eternal kingdom that has no end. Let me put all this diagrammatically.



God is building his kingdom and nothing can stop it. In a prophecy of judgement against Assyria where Isaiah includes any nation who opposes God and seeks to hinder his plans, he states emphatically –

Isaiah 14:26-27

This is the plan determined for the whole world; this is the hand stretched out over all nations. For the Lord almighty has purposed, and who can thwart him? His hand is stretched out and who can turn it back?

In answer to Isaiah's questions? No one! No one can hinder the purposes of God. God is building his kingdom and his kingdom will be built! But the question that bubbles to the surface is, 'Ah yes, but **how** will he build?'

## The strategy

God is building his kingdom. He is intent on it. And he has a strategy. God always has a strategy and he always works in perfect conformity to his will. In the case of kingdom building – winning hearts for Christ – his M.O. (modus operandi) is to utilize human agents to carry out vital parts of the work. He has chosen to use broken, flawed and dysfunctional sinners to seek sinners to be saved and, quite apart from the fact that it has been ordained by God, it actually makes a lot of sense.

The best person to counsel an addict is another addict who has found healing. The best person to minister to someone who has lost a loved one is another who has also lost a loved one and has learned to move forward. The best person to support a cancer sufferer is a cancer survivor. It's called empathy and it makes perfect sense. The best person to present the gospel to a sinner is another sinner – albeit one that is saved and can speak of the joy and peace of knowing that he has been rescued in and by the work of Christ. God is the property developer and saved human beings are his labourers. This is the strategy and there is no other.

## The disciples: a case study

Before his departure back to heaven, Jesus commissioned his disciples thus –

Acts 1:8

...you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

Just like a stone thrown into a pond, Jesus made a big splash two thousand years ago with unparalleled teaching accompanied by astonishing signs and wonders as he ministered characteristically amongst his own people. And, just as the initial splash made by a stone thrown into a pond generates a series of waves that radiate outward from the point of impact in concentric circles, so too were there similar consequences following Jesus' earthly ministry – radiating out from Jerusalem, then Judea, Samaria, and ultimately, to the ends of the earth.

There are, however, significant differences between the splash of a stone and Jesus' ministry. Firstly, the concentric waves following the impact of a stone are nothing more than a simple case of cause and effect whereas the waves following Jesus' ministry were both intentional and strategic. 'I want

you to go out and make waves. I want you to be kingdom builders, and I want you to start right here, where I was murdered.’ And secondly, inevitably, the ripples in a pond diminish and die out. In contrast, Jesus’ ministry and subsequent instructions to his followers were intended to multiply and continue to multiply like the spread of a brushfire on a windy day.

Jesus had a message that would change human history. It made sense to send out his closest followers (eyewitnesses and forgiven sinners) as his witnesses to testify to others to guarantee the spread of that message after he had gone. In fact, he had been grooming and training them for this very purpose for three years. They were the ones who had heard him teach. They’d seen his miracles. At least one had seen his death, and all but Judas, had witnessed his resurrection first hand. They could honestly say, ‘We saw it with our own eyes and we heard it with our own ears.’ John’s first epistle even begins in this very fashion –

1 John 1:1

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched – this we proclaim concerning the Word of life.

Clearly, the ‘we’ refers to John and the others who had been with Jesus. And there was no one better equipped to spread the message of the gospel than these disciples who, incidentally, had been promoted to the role of apostleship (from the Greek, ‘*apostello*’ – meaning, ‘I send’) upon Jesus’ final departure back to heaven. Once, they were only mere disciples – followers, students, devotees – but now they were that, and more. They became, ‘sent ones’ – disciples on a mission. It was intentional. Jesus had planned it that way and it’s easy to see the strategic shrewdness in doing so. It simply made sense.

But what about the strategy of beginning in Jerusalem? Surely this was madness! This was the same city where, only a little over a month earlier, the religious leaders, out of fear and jealousy, had stirred a crowd to demand the most excruciating method of execution ever devised. Jesus was not just executed. He was brutalized beyond recognition (Isaiah 52:14). In this same city Jesus now wanted his newly appointed apostles to begin the continuation of the work he had started. Surely, they too would be tortured and killed for their efforts. Remember, these guys were gold. They were the essential witnesses. If they were executed in the same fashion as, and because of Jesus – it’s very simple – no more witnesses! Isn’t he shooting himself in the foot?

Why not begin somewhere else? Why not somewhere like Samaria? The town of Sychar would have been perfect. Far enough away from the heat of Jerusalem to be safe, yet near enough to be effective. After all, hadn’t Jesus had great success there following his discussion with the woman at the well (John 4)? It would be the ideal place to start, wouldn’t it? And once the ball was rolling, and once there was a new army of followers (there’s always strength in numbers isn’t there?), and once things had cooled off in Jerusalem, then they could return and tackle the Jewish capital. But Jesus was adamant. You must begin in Jerusalem. Why?

As it turns out, it was strategically significant, for it seems that the same people who had cried out for Jesus’ death were still harbouring the guilt of their actions. They just needed a little reminder – a gentle shove. On the day of Pentecost (50 days following the Passover), the eleven, plus Judas’ replacement, Matthias, were baptized with the Spirit and began speaking spontaneously in all the tongues of those who were visiting Jerusalem for the holiday.

This spilled out onto the street and, thoroughly amazed, people were asking – ‘What does this mean?’ (Acts 2:12). This gave Peter the ideal opportunity to enlighten the crowd that was quickly

growing into a multitude. He began by explaining that this phenomenon was merely the fulfillment of Joel 2:28-32, God's promised outpouring of the Holy Spirit in the last days. He then turned his attention to Jesus and all that had recently happened in Jerusalem – his death and resurrection – and how it was all in fulfillment of the prophetic words of David.

Empowered and emboldened by the Spirit, Peter finished his address by challenging the crowd with this blatant accusation –

Acts 2:36

Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.

'Whom you crucified!' He had read them well. He knew their guilt and shame as well as they did.

Acts 2:37

When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, 'Brothers what shall we do?'

He boxed them into a corner and left them nowhere else to turn. 'Repent and be baptized into the name of Jesus for the forgiveness of your sins' (v38). And the result? Around 3000 were added to their number that day. That's an increase in size of the body of believers of around 2,500% following just one short speech! Furthermore, as time wore on, and this band of followers refused to back down, and as they lived out the gospel of love, thousands more were added. Begin in Jerusalem? Absolutely!

Jesus had clearly set these guys aside for this very purpose (and others like it). They were the obvious – the only – choice. Let's stand back for a moment and examine the broad brush strokes of the picture thus far.

- If we accept the notion that the Holy Spirit is the agent of repentance,<sup>4</sup> then he came at just the right time, targeting those who had gathered in Jerusalem at Pentecost.
- Filled with the Spirit and hence lead by the Spirit – and drawing on his own testimony (Acts 2:32) – Peter used the established word of God (the sword of the Spirit) to explain both the miraculous phenomenon and the meaning of Jesus' death and resurrection.
- The strategy was thus two pronged. The Holy Spirit not only brought non believers to the point of repentance, he also employed human agents (apostles – particularly Peter) who he equipped especially for the task. The crowd that gathered around the apostles, and heard what Peter had to say, became the proverbial, 'ham in the (Holy Spirit) sandwich.'

Thus we can rightly say that –

- The word of God (sharper than any two edge sword)
- The Spirit of God (who works in the hearts of the listener and the speaker)
- The willingness of the worker (who fearlessly devotes himself to the task)

– are central to effective evangelism and we can conclude that –

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<sup>4</sup> TPNTC, The Gospel According to John, Apollos (IVP), Leicester England, 1991, D.A.Carson, p534.

The intentions of God and the strategy of God, realized through the power of the Holy Spirit, and carried out by the willingness of the Spirit-filled worker, make for explosive results.

This is a foundational principle in evangelism, and one that we will come back to as we continue our survey.

But what now? There are no more eyewitnesses and no one specifically trained by Jesus himself for him to send out. Who will go? Who will he send? Whose job is it?

## What Now?

Who will do this work now that 2000 years have passed? Where are the witnesses? Where are those who can speak about Christ with power and authority? Let's now explore the answers to these questions.

As well as doing the work of evangelists, the apostles generally held various positions of leadership in the church. Are we now then to look to the ordained ministers and pastors – the leaders of the church – to carry out this important work? If not, then who? Does it now fall to the rank and file members of the church? 'Surely not! Heaven forbid! They're not qualified, are they?!

Here's a novel idea. Maybe God could do it himself. If he were to target people for salvation and quietly goad them into attending church, surely, over time, they would absorb the gospel and gently drift into his kingdom? Actually, that does happen. I've seen it on numerous occasions. But is it really how God wants to operate in the twenty first century? Was it ever God's intention to propagate the gospel in this way? I think not!

Perhaps a combination of all three would work. The ministers and pastors (let us keep it at the local level for the time being) could do the work at the coal face. God could still bring in the odd stray, and the rank and file? What could they do? Perhaps they could adopt the strategy of attraction – to live such exemplary lives that the outsider might see the power of the Christian faith and be attracted to it like a moth to a flame or iron filings to a magnet. After all, didn't Jesus say –

Matthew 5:16

Let your light shine before men that they might see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.

It is certainly a laudable approach in some ways. And it appears that this was certainly God's intention for Israel under the old covenants of law and circumcision. In their book, 'Salvation to the Ends of the Earth,' Andreas Kostenberger and Peter O'Brien comment on the principle of incorporation by attraction<sup>5</sup> while refuting the notion that national Israel, under the old covenants, served any actual missionary<sup>6</sup> function. In other words, they were not sent out to make converts. Rather, through their obedience to the law the people of God were to be a light to the nations – to be

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<sup>5</sup> NSBT, *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth*, Apollos (IVP), Leicester, England, 2001, A.J. Kostenberger, P.T. O'Brien, pp34-36.

<sup>6</sup> Our English word 'missionary' comes from the Latin, 'missio,' 'I send.' It is the Latin equivalent to the Greek 'apostello.'

attractive to the outsider, and furthermore, to be particularly welcoming of foreigners seeking a genuine encounter with the living God (Exodus 12:48, 22:21).

In contrast, Jesus' approach was revolutionary. He sent his disciples out to bring others into his kingdom. The point is clear – we, as new covenant people, are not to lean solely on an old covenant principle to spread the gospel. Jesus' words in Matthew 5:13-16 have their place (and we'll explore their application in much greater detail later on), but they can never be the sole foundation of our approach to outreach.

How then should we proceed? What are God's instructions for us here in the twenty first century (or any other century for that matter)? Let us turn to three passages that answer these questions more than adequately. The first comes from the very end of Matthew's Gospel where Jesus said to his followers –

Matthew 28:19-20a

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.

A couple of important points to note.

- Firstly, they're not making 'converts', but 'disciples'. Here in the twenty first century, a word like convert, I think, is too soft. A convert may just see Jesus as saviour – 'Yeah sure, I believe Jesus died for me and that he rose again in victory over death – hallelujah brother!' But that's only half of the equation. Jesus wants disciples. He wants followers. If the work of evangelism is done properly it will create disciples who fully understand and recognize right from the outset both the Lordship and the Salvation of Christ. Paul writes –

Romans 10:9

If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead you will be saved.

This is critical to the work of evangelism. Without the Lordship of Christ, there is no real conversion, and the gospel has not been truly preached. This is made clear with the instruction, 'teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you (Matt 28:20a).' The command was to go out into the world and make more disciples like themselves.

- Secondly – and more importantly to our discussion – while it is true that Jesus spoke these words to his disciples (those who had actually been with him) it is clear that from that point on, the job of the disciple (any disciple) is to make more disciples. So the original disciples go and make disciples who then, in turn, as new disciples, take on the task of being disciple-makers.<sup>7</sup> They make more disciples who then make ... It's pretty simple –

As disciples of Christ, we are all disciple-makers!!!

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<sup>7</sup> The Trellis and the Vine, Matthias Media, Kingsford, Australia, 2009, T. Payne, C. Marshall, p42-43.

The **second** passage I want to draw to your attention comes from 1Peter.

1Peter 3:15

But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.

The ‘hope’, to which he is referring, is of course, hope in Christ. Thus Peter is unambiguously stating the need to be prepared at all times to tell others about Christ. But to whom is he directing these instructions? Well it’s not the deacons and it’s not the elders, and nor is it the gifted evangelists. He tells us who the ‘who’ is at the opening of the letter. It’s to ‘God’s elect...’ The instruction to be equipped for the work of evangelism is issued to every member of the church in the region of Asia regardless of their gifting by the Holy Spirit.

The **third** passage, and for me the most powerful of all, is the parable of the four soils (Luke 8), one of the most well known of all parables. Here we see different kinds of human hearts representing different kinds of soil/planting media (the path, the stony ground, the thorny ground, and the good soil) into which the grain seed (the word of God) is sown. Jesus makes it clear – it’s only the good soil that authentically represents the true disciple. But the parable doesn’t end there. Possibly the most important aspect of the analogy is its conclusion. Every seed sown in the good soil doesn’t just make for a healthy plant, it produces a plant that reproduces itself 30, 60, 100 times what was sown. It couldn’t be more plain. Wheat produces wheat, corn produces corn, olive trees bear olives and disciples make disciples. The fruit we bear is all about being involved in making others like ourselves – fertile hearts that eagerly receive the word of God. As true followers of Jesus, we are supposed to reproduce ourselves. The message couldn’t be clearer.

Are you a disciple of Christ? That makes you a disciple maker. Are you fully equipped to carry out the work and to ‘give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have?’ If not, then I’m sure you’ll agree, there is work to be done. We (and that means all of us) are now the witnesses in absence of the original eyewitnesses. We are God’s strategy. There is no other. No ifs, no buts. God is building his kingdom. He is the property developer and we are his labourers. There is no other strategy.

Having received the gift of eternal life, are not our hearts on fire to give it away? If not, why not? In 2Corinthians, where he examines the ministry of reconciliation, Paul writes –

2Corinthians 5:14a

For Christ’s love compels us, because we are convinced that one (Christ) died for all (all who would put their faith in him)...

Does the love of Christ compel you? Does it ignite a raging fire in you to go out and declare the gospel? It should. It must – how can it not? Let me tell you something – there is no more loving thing you can do for someone than to tell them what Jesus has done for them! Most will reject the message, Jesus said as much (Matt 7:14). However, occasionally, someone you minister to will accept the gospel, and there is no greater joy than having the privilege of playing a part in bringing them into God’s kingdom. And while it’s not without its snares and pitfalls, it’s also not unachievable. God wouldn’t have given us the task otherwise. This book is all about how to make a start.

Sometimes I walk through the shopping centre, along with maybe a thousand others, and I wonder how many of them are saved. In reality, it's only a small proportion – perhaps somewhere around five in a hundred (or less). Over nine hundred and fifty of them will face the wrath of God. I am deeply troubled – there are too many to help. I don't know where to begin. Who should I talk to? How do I start that conversation? It's so overwhelming, I finish my shopping, get in the car and go home. I feel defeated.

Ever had that experience – or something like it – a moment of clarity where we can see just how high the stakes are and just how overpowering the job at hand is? Then let me leave you with a little something to consider before we move on.

If each one of us brought just one person into God's kingdom over the next couple of years and this new disciple was then encouraged and trained to do likewise – within 5 years our churches would be 4 times bigger.

Remember – the best person to counsel a sinner is a forgiven sinner. God is building his kingdom, and, under his direction, so are we.

But just like any artisan, we need to be trained. So, let us begin that training. It's not an easy job, but it's not as overwhelming as it may seem!

## 2. Prayer

### The necessity

The Psalmist writes –

Psalm 127:1

Unless the Lord builds the house, the builders labor in vain.

How often do we launch into something without consulting God? All too often! I'd be a rich man if I had a dollar for every time I caught myself planning, strategizing and organizing without seeking God's guidance first. It's a bad habit, and one that I'm in the process of attempting to condition myself out of (with God's help, of course, which is kind of ironic – I'm seeking God's help to learn to seek God's help), because this I know to be true. Any venture we undertake as Christians that forgets to ask, invite, include, involve, petition and appeal to God is nothing but vanity. We must begin with prayer.

Prayer is the recognition that –

1) God is approachable. John reminds the readers of his first epistle that, as believers in the Son of God, we can approach the throne of grace with absolute confidence.

1 John 5:14

This is the confidence we have in approaching God – that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us – whatever we ask – we know that we have what we asked of him.

We must remember that prayer is simply a matter of talking to God. It is a practice that he not only welcomes, but encourages us to engage in. When God proposed the destruction of Sodom, didn't Abraham boldly, yet respectfully, bargain with God to turn from his wrath? And doesn't James remind us that, by faith, Abraham was God's friend (James 2:23). Are we not in the same position – by faith – God's friends, who are invited to approach the throne of grace with confidence with our petitions and concerns, knowing that when we ask according to his will, he will grant our requests?

2) God desires to work in our world in a powerful way. God is passionate about his world. He is both overjoyed with it and grieved by it at the same time. Look how passionate God is about a world that has succumbed to the ravages of sin –

Genesis 6:6

The Lord was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain

Ultimately, he is so passionate that he will meet the cost of our sin himself through the fatal brutality of the cross. God has demonstrated in the most astonishing way just how far he will go in working

amongst the mess that we have created. We should be seeking his good will to continue to work powerfully amongst us.

3) We are powerless. God is the source of all power, wisdom and strength and will act in perfect accord with his will in bringing change into people's lives. We cannot carry out any task that he has ordained for us without the power of the Holy Spirit at work in us. As Christians, we all possess the Spirit, but do we really seek his power in all that we do?

### **In the context of evangelism**

The most foundational thing we must understand about evangelism is that conversion to discipleship in Christ is a work of God. Remember, it is God who is building his kingdom. We, therefore, are just mere labourers – or, as in the Pauline metaphor – seed planters and irrigators. It is God who makes them grow (1Cor 3:6).

In a discussion with some of his fellow Jews over his claim to be the bread of life, Jesus plainly told them –

John 6:45

No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him.

In other words, it is clearly the work of God to turn an individual's heart. Furthermore, it is the work of the Holy Spirit to convict them of their sin (John 16:8) and to bring them to a state of repentance. It should thus be self evident to us that to proceed with the work of evangelism without God, who both draws and convicts, is sheer madness. A softening of the sinner's heart must be taking place as we approach them with the gospel. This should be our first prayer and possibly our most fervent.

But, of course, it doesn't end there. We must be seeking God's wisdom and power in every aspect of this extraordinary and miraculous work. We might need a new attitude ourselves. We need to be presented with the right opportunities. We need words. We need discernment. We may need a strategy. We need to be sharp in our thoughts. We need courage. We need....

Let's look at some of these things in detail.

#### **1) A softening heart.**

In its natural state, the human heart is hostile to God (Rom 8:7). It is simply part and parcel of the sinful nature. The ice has got to be melting as we approach the unbeliever with the gospel, and only God can do that. It is God, and God alone, who changes human hearts in accord with his will. In ch24 of his prophetic ministry, Jeremiah recounts God's vow, following seventy years of discipline in a foreign land, to transform the attitude of the returning exiles of the southern kingdom of Judah –

Jeremiah 24:7

I will give them a heart to know me, that I am the Lord. They will be my people and I will be their God, for they will return to me with all their heart.

And Ezekiel opens a similar window to God's thoughts on the matter when he writes –

Ezekiel 11:19-20

I will give them an undivided heart and put a new spirit in them; I will remove from them their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh. Then they will follow my decrees and be careful to follow my laws. They will be my people and I will be their God.

It is God who changes sinful human hearts to accept him on his terms. We must pray that God will be doing this whenever we approach someone with the words of eternal life.

2) **Desire**

When it comes to evangelism we may need a heart transplant ourselves – and if not, perhaps at least a little corrective surgery. We need to pray for a right attitude – that we might care enough to actually do the work. We may have grown up with the idea that it's someone else's job. We might have become so busy in our lives that we never think of it. We might be in a trough and don't care enough about the salvation of others. All of these are off the table – totally unacceptable. If our attitude is wrong it needs to be addressed. Pray that God will change us and use us.

Following the shameful Bathsheba and Uriah incident of 2Kings 12, David made a very public confession of his sin in Psalm 51. Within this stunning document, David expresses his desire to evangelize those who had turned away from God.

Psalm 51:10-13

Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast Spirit within me.  
Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me.  
Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me. Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will turn back to you.

Here, David clearly sees that he is not in a fit state. He is still grieving over his sin. He knows deep down that he is useless as a kingdom builder without a change of attitude, which, ironically, is already budding, evidenced by the nature of his requests. A pure heart, a steadfast and willing spirit, the joy of salvation and, of course, the presence of the Holy Spirit, are paramount to this change of attitude. And the intention? To teach transgressors God's ways, and that sinners might turn back to him.

But did David transgress too far to ever be effective in this work he so desperately wanted to do? Won't he now be ignored by the man on the street because, as king and leader, he has just granted all Israel the perfect warrant to murder and commit adultery indiscriminately? Won't his character be questioned and ridiculed? Won't people say, 'Who the hell are you to tell me what to do, you miserable hypocrite!'<sup>8</sup> Maybe – but that's not the point. Whether anybody ever listens to his call for repentance is, in a sense, irrelevant. The fact remains that David, having been savagely burned by sin, sought God's power to change him, so that he might have the right attitude to do the work.

Have you ever prayed like this?

Father God, please make me willing to do the work you would have me do in building your kingdom. Please change my attitude, give me what I need to do

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<sup>8</sup> We will discuss David's potential effectiveness in the next chapter.

your will and help me to have your love for others residing and burning in my heart. Let the love of Christ compel me. By the power of the Holy Spirit and in Jesus' name I seek these things, Amen.

You should! We all should!

### 3) **Opportunity**

In numerous places in the New Testament, Paul sought the prayers of others from different churches to continue the work to which God had called him. To the church in Colossae he wrote –

Colossians 4:3

And pray for us also, that God may open a door for our message...

‘...that God may open a door...’ Paul was on the front line as a (Holy Spirit) gifted evangelist and was therefore looking for any and every opportunity to tell others about Jesus. To him, these opportunities were merely doors that God might throw open so that he could wander through and preach the gospel. He was always ready. Thus he could encourage his readers in the ‘Armour of God’ passage (Eph 6:10-20) to have their feet ‘fitted with the readiness<sup>9</sup> that comes from the gospel of peace (Eph 6:15).’ He ate, slept and breathed the gospel, looked for opportunities, and seized them with both hands.

Most of us are not in his position. Most of us are not gifted with the spiritual gift of evangelism. However, we must honestly ask ourselves if we are ready to seize whatever opportunities God does present us with. More importantly, are we praying for them to come? Paul was looking for any and every opportunity to preach the good news of Christ. We should be petitioning God for the same thing.

### 4) **Means**

To the Ephesians<sup>10</sup> Paul wrote, asking –

Ephesians 6:18-20

...pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints. Pray also for me, that whenever I open my mouth, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly as I should.

Praying in the Spirit simply means to pray as a Christian inspired and lead by the Holy Spirit.<sup>11</sup> As such we recognize not only the Father and the Son – as we usually do when we pray – but also the Spirit who is presented in Scripture not only as the agent of change, but literally, as God himself. It would be thus somewhat criminal for us to exclude him from our prayers. Pray in the Spirit on all occasions. The Spirit is the one who makes things happen down here at ground zero. It is by the Holy

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<sup>9</sup> Here Paul is imagining Roman army boots. In our context I prefer to think of them as a pair of NIKE's.

<sup>10</sup> The earliest copies of ‘Ephesians’ we have don't carry any title. Thus this letter may have had much greater circulation than just the church in Ephesus. If so, then Paul's request for prayer probably went out to tens of thousands of people.

<sup>11</sup> PNTC, The Letter to the Ephesians, Eerdmans Publishing, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1999, P.T. O'Brien, 484-5

Spirit that we possess the word of God. It was by the Holy Spirit that the prophets spoke and revealed God's plans. It was by the Holy Spirit that Jesus came into the world and worked all kinds of signs and wonders. It is by the Holy Spirit that God's people are gifted with skills and talents to utilize in the building up and the building out of His church.

The Holy Spirit is indispensable in the building of His kingdom.

Regarding the topic of Spiritual gifts, you may not have the gift of evangelism, but Scripture is clear, God has certainly gifted you with something. It might be prayer, or hospitality, or generosity, or teaching, or helps, or any one, or more, of the other spiritual gifts listed in Scripture. And although it is the Spirit who gives it/them just as He determines (1Cor 12:11) It is our responsibility to –

- a) discover what it/they is/are (remember, Jesus said ask, seek, knock, Matt 7:7-12.), and –
- b) find ways to put it/them to work, wherever and whenever possible, to assist in the building up of God's people and to help us as we seek to bring the gospel to non-believers.

More importantly to our discussion, and precisely because most of us are not gifted evangelists, we desperately need the power of the Spirit to help us find the right words. Paul's petition is priceless, '...that words may be given me...' Even the gifted pro with decades of experience did not trust his own mouth. Why is this so? He had a full working knowledge of the existing Scriptures. He had been taught the gospel by revelation by Christ himself (Gal 1:12). He was continually proving that Jesus was the Christ. Why does he need words? Surely after so many years he already had the right words, didn't he?

There are probably a number of reasons he makes this petition. Firstly, although a full time worker in the mission field he knew all too well just how powerfully the sinful nature compromises everything we do (Rom 7:7-25). Even the best of us can give in to the temptation to lie, distort, embellish or deceive. Seeking the words of the Spirit is an extra safeguard against this.

Secondly, the Spirit knows much more than we do. He has a full working knowledge of the complex network of cultural, social, family, religious and linguistic contexts of every individual. The Spirit knows their character, personality, idiosyncrasies, likes, dislikes, grievances against God and so on. He knows what kind of approach will at least get them to listen. The gospel is a, 'one size fits all' initiative (it has to be – there's only one gospel). However, every situation is different and will require some element of sensitivity that only the Spirit can best discern and bring to the table.

I once tried evangelizing a Russian Jehovah's Witness and was really struggling with trying to convince him of the full divinity of Christ (the biggest issue for JW's) until, in a flash of inspiration (a Holy Spirit moment), I changed gears and simply told him of my background in drug and alcohol abuse and how Jesus (the real Jesus) had healed me. It was only then that he started to seriously listen. For this guy, it was important for him to see Christ's power at work in someone's life. The right words for him, at that time, were given me to speak.

A caveat – it's not magic – ie, we are not seized by the Spirit and controlled like a robot. And we're not reading a script. We have to think. We have to use our brain. If I'm speaking to a Kalathumpian, it helps to know how a Kalathumpian functions. This is why Paul wrote, '...I have become all things to all men so that...I may save some' (1Cor 9:22). He understood the principle of contextualization – know your subject and be able to stand in their shoes.

In the case of my Russian friend, it helped to understand that he grew up under a communist regime (the JW strictness thus possibly appealed to him), and furthermore, to do some homework and know some JW theology (which I did), so that I could build a solid argument for the full Divinity of Christ. These things allowed me to continue a dialogue that lasted for several weeks before I changed tack

and told him my testimony. Without all that cultural groundwork our discussion may only have lasted 10 minutes.

We will talk more about making these kinds of preparations a little later on. At this stage it's enough to know that the Holy Spirit gives us insight as the conversation with the non-believer unfolds. He helps us gain a greater level of sensitivity to our listener and to speak appropriately, and thus assists us in tailoring our gospel presentation in a way that really cuts through the red tape of their situation.

Thirdly, Paul's request for words to be given is a powerful demonstration of humility. Paul was a man who had explained the gospel so many times he could probably have done it in his sleep. It would have been all too easy for him to just launch into it automatically. But he doesn't. He humbly recognizes his own shortcomings and weaknesses and seeks God's help – and God delights in blessing the humble.

## 5) **Courage**

'...fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel...declare it fearlessly as I should (Eph 6:19-20)' Notice how Paul, the seasoned campaigner who has explained the gospel hundreds (maybe thousands) of times, still needs a shot in the arm. Mr. Fearless (at least that's the way I think we often perceive him) asks for courage – twice within the space of two verses. The point is that he is not fearless. Look at the admission he makes to the church in Corinth.

1 Corinthians 2:1, 4

When I came to you, brothers...I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling.

He may well have been naturally more courageous than most, but he is far from fearless. He knew how hard it is to speak the words of truth to an unbelieving world, and just like you and I, needed more courage to do it. We are grappling with a profoundly difficult task. But we know that, don't we? Isn't that why we keep avoiding it?! Perhaps we don't pray enough. Prayer is the essential ingredient. It is the first and most fundamental foundation on which effective evangelism rests.

Five pillars of prayer critical for the work of evangelism – A melting heart, Desire, Opportunity, Means and Courage. If we are mindful of these things when we pray, a whole new dimension to our faith will be thrown open as we seek to engage in the work that God has given us. But we must ask in faith and we must ask out of our concern for the lost as James reminds his readers in chapter 4 of his letter.

James 4:2b-3a

You do not have, because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives.

Ask in faith and ask with the right motive. Again, just like Jesus said in Matt 7, 'Ask, and you shall receive.' And nowhere in our lives as disciples is that principle more applicable than in the building of God's kingdom.

What Jesus has asked us to do in spreading the good news of the gospel is not easy – not by any means. That's why it must be covered in prayer. It is a hard job, but it is also a very rewarding job. Let me let you in on a little secret. When you see those you've prayed for and evangelized come to Christ, it's not just a joyful moment for them. God allows us (the ones who lead them to Christ) to share in their joy. In fact, one of the most joyful things you can do in life is to lead someone to Jesus.

In closing this chapter – if I may be permitted the luxury of this little analogy – it's a bit like a golfer hitting a hole-in-one. A rare moment where something very special happens. In this case, however, infinitely better, for you have partnered with God in making the eternal security of another human being, cast in the image of God, a reality.

Remember –

The intentions of God and the strategy of God, realized through the power of the Holy Spirit, and carried out by the willingness of the Spirit-filled worker, make for explosive results.

### 3.

## Character

### What the world sees

It goes without saying that God's desire for his people is to be of sound character. Although we are saved by grace, we are continually exhorted in Scripture to reflect the character of God in our lives. However, this focus on godly character, while ultimately tied to the maintenance of our relationship with God, also carries a deeper dimension that we must never forget.

Our actions ***must not*** be a stumbling block to the unbeliever. Our behaviour ***must*** be consistent with what we believe. Peter was fully aware of this principle.

1 Peter 2:11-12

Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against the soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.

Sound familiar? It should. Jesus said almost exactly the same thing. 'Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven' (Matt 5:16). While this is not strictly evangelism – from the Greek, '*euangelizo*,' meaning, 'I ***preach*** the gospel,' and thus a ***verbal*** activity – it is a vital foundation for evangelism.

The unbeliever is not going to move into an eternally life saving faith simply through witnessing our good deeds. They still need instruction. They need to understand the nuts and bolts of the atonement, appreciate the critical importance of the resurrection, accept the Lordship of Christ and invite Jesus into their heart. Indeed, no one gets saved simply by watching – but when we live as God would have us live, they will recognize that there is real power in what we believe. If they are moved to the extent that they actually glorify/praise God because of what they see in us – as both Jesus and Peter assert – a stunning blow has been dealt to their unbelief. Our character thus becomes a solid platform from which to evangelize.

Sadly, the opposite is true if our character is questionable. In fact, Jesus addresses this very issue at the beginning of the salt and light passage in Matt 5 where he declares –

Matthew 5:13

You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men.

So much meat in only one verse. Let's take a moment to explore, in detail, the importance of these words.

## Salt of the earth

Verse 13a

You are the salt of the earth.

I'd love a dollar for every time I've heard someone referred to as the salt of the earth. Mostly though, the term is misused and completely misses the point, for it's usually applied to the kind of guy who's always the first to buy a round of drinks at the pub after work, or the guy who's happy to loan his friends money, or the rich philanthropist who's never really going to miss the money he donates to charities. All are sad and sorry corruptions of Jesus' words. If so, then what did he mean?

There were two common uses of salt in the ancient world, both of which are still current. Firstly, salt was, and still is, used as a flavouring. But it's not just any old flavouring. It's strong – a little goes a long way, and it possesses a distinctive and unmistakable bite.

Jesus takes his first disciples – only a handful of men (a little goes a long way) and instructs them to flavour this world in a profound and significant way. Salt brings a tasteless meal to life and so here, the disciples are being encouraged to salt the world. In a world that does not naturally possess this distinctive flavor, they were, through the quality of their lives, to abandon themselves to the task of being God's instruments in transforming a spiritually tasteless environment.

The other use of salt is as a preservative. In the days before refrigeration, salt was used to preserve meat and fish that wasn't cooked and eaten directly after it was slaughtered or caught. In other words, it was added to prevent spoiling, degradation and corruption. In Jesus' view, this is the state of the world without him – spoilt, degraded and corrupt. His followers then, are to be a preserving influence in this world.

The practice of love for God (evidenced by godly morality) and the practice of love for others (which reflects the heart of God) are tightly framed in the cross-hairs of Jesus' statement, 'You are the salt of the earth.'

'You are the salt of the earth,' is really a definitive statement summing up the two great commands to love God and to love others, the true anchor block of the Christian faith. The statement is thus the seed of a mighty revolution and these men were not just invited to attend, but to be in the heat of the battle. It is a calling. 'You are...' not, you might be, or could be, or should be – but 'You are the salt of the earth.' Jesus was calling his followers to take part in a revolution to transform a world lost to sin. To win it back for God. To bring people back to the Lord. To see them reconciled to their creator. They are to be distinctive and different – in fact, so radically different that they might have the capacity to influence the thinking and behaviour of those around them, initially simply by example.

We, as the new disciples, are to do likewise – to have a profound and positive influence on our world. Let me give you an example, a case that is currently unfolding as I write.

I know of a situation in a Sydney church where one of its members has been struck down with serious illness. At the same time – let's call her Jan – her circumstances changed and she was left with no accommodation. Homeless and ill, Jan was practically beside herself with worry. Thankfully, the church picked up the tab for some temporary accommodation and a storage unit for her household goods. Several weeks went by and she was hospitalized. While she was undergoing

treatment a few of the members of the church made it their business to ensure that permanent accommodation was organized for when she was discharged from hospital.

It's great, isn't it? But here's the kingdom building value of it all. One of the staff at the hospital (an immigrant from the sub-continent and thus, probably Hindu) was so astonished at the level of love and care lavished upon this poor woman by the members of her church, she openly made the admission, 'I'm seriously going to have to reconsider my understanding of God.'

*'...so they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven!'*

Make no mistake, the things we do, and the way we behave, have vital kingdom building implications. This is why Jesus continues by asking this probing question, which was also intended to stand as a serious warning to us –

Verse 13b

*But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again?*

This question is not being posed to a group of high school science students as a riddle by an irascible Chemistry teacher – ie, it's not about how something could be removed from NaCl and for it to still remain as Sodium Chloride. It is, nonetheless, still a chemistry question. And the answer is simple. Salt can lose its saltiness by becoming diluted or polluted or both. To make it salty again would require the removal of either the compound that diluted it or the pollutant, whichever the case may be. Filtering, boiling, distilling – it's probably not that hard, in most cases, to return to a petri-dish of relatively pure, if not pure salt.

In the case of the Christian, we may become 'diluted' by laziness and indifference, or 'polluted' by falling back into step with the world – by allowing the world to dictate to us once again how we should think and how we should act. Usually, both of these things happen together.

How can we be made salty again if we lose our saltiness? As noted, it's probably relatively easy in the chemistry sense. Although the student who possesses an acute sense of humour and can think outside the box may just say to the teacher, 'Just chuck it out and get some more from the pack.' A smart-alec answer designed to infuriate the teacher, but not without merit, as we can see from the way in which Jesus answers his own question.

Verse 13c

*It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men.*

Jesus has posed an extremely serious question. And his answer is not unlike that of the student above. The difference being, of course, that we are now talking about human lives and human worth. Thankfully, it's not a salvation question. The throwing out is not a rejection by God. Rather, it's a rejection by those we had planned to share the gospel with. It is thus a question of our effectiveness. If we have fallen back into the world and are tainted once again with its corruption, how will anybody ever take us seriously?

Is he not right? We are called to be different – to be holy. If we demonstrate that we are not, then why shouldn't we be trampled and ridiculed by non believers? If I fall back into guzzling grog, who will take me seriously when I try to tell them about Jesus? If I ditch my wife and trade up for a newer model, who's going to listen to my preaching? If I engage in deceitful, greedy behaviour, how am I

going to be viewed by an unbelieving world? If I lose my saltiness, how can I be made salty again? Will I not simply be trampled by my listeners!?! Does he not make a salient point (pun intended)?

Being the salt of the earth is about having an overwhelming effect on those around us. When we lose that capacity, it may take years or even decades to get it back (maybe never, yet God may still use us – he did with Peter) and thus, every attempt we make at telling others about Jesus falls on deaf ears. We are good for nothing except to be ‘trampled by men.’ And that’s exactly what happens. The press, for example, are like a pack of starving hyenas whenever a high profile Christian gets it wrong. We’ve all seen the humiliation of Christians who have suffered moral failure in the public arena.

It’s really very simple – our faith and actions must be working together. They must be consistent. How can we be Christ’s ambassadors – as Paul puts it in 2Corinthians 5:20 – if we are the same as everyone around us? Quietly getting on with the work of doing God’s will in our lives – living with honesty and integrity, acts of charity, kindness, compassion and so on – go a long way to attracting people’s attention and reversing negative opinions of the church.

This is the principle of attraction we spoke of briefly in the first chapter.

## Hypocrisy

At this point we need to be aware that our – let’s call it – exemplary behaviour, should spring naturally from our faith (instance 1). It should be the genuine fruit of our relationship with God. If however, our faith is weak and thus a strong morality and good deeds are burdensome to us and don’t naturally arise from our faith (instance 2), our evangelistic attempts will probably be disastrous.

If you count yourself amongst those of the first instance, evangelism will simply be a natural extension of your life of faith. You will make mistakes, but they will not be insurmountable. In this case, you need to be transparent and honest. We aren’t perfect – far from it – and in telling his disciples to be salt and light, Jesus wasn’t suggesting it. Therefore, wherever and whenever our character flaws and immoral behaviour are exposed, we must be ready to admit them and be able to confess, ‘Yep, you’re right, I can’t deny it. I do struggle with that issue. It’s always been a problem for me, but I’m working on it.’ Or, when we have given offence of any kind, to be humble enough to apologize without reservation, without transference of blame and without conditions.

If we present to those around us in this manner, we will win their respect. Just like us, most people – whatever their moral touchstone – will be able to identify with us because of their own frailty. Everyone understands the saying, ‘Yeah, well no one’s perfect.’ It’s when we try and hide our imperfections, or pretend that we’re better than we really are that we attract the greatest ridicule.

If you are of the second instance, then there is much work to be done. It is time to repent! You cannot be used by God as a kingdom builder if serious sin<sup>12</sup> is lurking in your character. Your faith needs to grow. You need to draw closer to God. You need to be immersed in his word. You need to be

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<sup>12</sup> When I say serious sin, I’m not suggesting that there’s a scale of sin ranging from the insignificant, to the serious, to the diabolical. Most Christians understand the biblical principle that God sees all sin as black (no shades of grey). However, it is the non-believer – whom we wish to attract – who generally has some sort of sliding scale of sin/s.

seeking the Holy Spirit's power to bring transformation to your heart so that God's good deeds can flow freely through you. If, having read and understood the salt and light passage, you have to pretend to be a good person (ie, good to those you know, and less than desirable outside that sphere) in an attempt to get non-believers to listen to you, you'll almost certainly be found out and your work will be fruitless.

If I am to take Hebrews 12 seriously (God disciplines his children), which I do, it may even be God who literally embarrasses you in public. Hypocrisy and pretense will only bring tears in the end.

All human beings are hypocrites, at least to some extent, for we are all sinners. Yet there are some who don't believe it. They seem to possess a finely tuned radar that beeps furiously whenever another hypocrite appears on their screen. If it wasn't so tragic it'd be amusing, for when we speak of those who perceive of themselves as 'squeaky-clean' and are utterly intolerant of hypocrites, then ironically, we speak of the greatest hypocrisy of all. These are the ones to be most watchful of. They will cut you to pieces and feed your remains to the vermin before you can say, 'Jesus loves you.'

We need to rise above hypocrisy, and not just to avoid a public lynching, but because Jesus, our Lord, is the agent of truth and we are his followers. Do not play pretend! It will get you nowhere! My experience is that people respect authenticity as much as they do sound character. So, what we're talking about here is harm minimization through truth and honesty, for this I know to be true –

*If we can rightly say that the unbeliever is always ready, at a moment's notice, to ridicule our faith because of our failures, we should also be fully aware that he will leap ferociously at our jugular when he smells the scent of our hypocrisy whether he has a right to or not.*

## **What if I drop the ball?**

Let us now return to the question, '...if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again?' And let us do so in the context of David's desire to turn sinners back to God. In ch2, I asked whether David's attempts to engage in this ministry might be in vain because he'd lost his saltiness – he'd dropped the ball. And Jesus' words of Matthew 5:13 certainly more than suggest it.

While David may well have dealt with the hypocrisy issue by means of a fervent and genuine public confession in Psalm 51, the agony and the stain of the sin remained, not because God didn't forgive him, but because people are very hard markers. They never forget and some will never forgive. There would certainly have been those, considering themselves righteous, who would only ever have treated David's attempts to instruct them with utter contempt. As Jesus said, '...thrown out and trampled by men.' However, when it came to preaching repentance to those who may have transgressed in like manner, it might be a different matter altogether.

Some, of course, would have just continued to revel in their sin, taking the king's actions as permission to do as they pleased. However, there would also have been those who despised themselves because of their sin, felt trapped in it and were full of self loathing. To people such as this, David could have a very powerful ministry. He could preach a message of good news, 'Bring it to God. Confess your sin and God will remove the stain of your guilt. Confess it and find forgiveness and peace. I know, because I've trodden that very path myself and found restoration in Him.' Could God effectively use David to bring these people back to him?

Remember the rule – the best person to counsel a sinner is a forgiven sinner? As noted earlier, it is simply part of God’s strategy to reach the world. I need, however, to add a further generalization. Because of human pride and discrimination, the principle usually works best when we approach someone at least a little like ourselves. It shouldn’t work this way, but it often does. Let me give you an example.

I know of a man in Long Bay gaol who is doing life for triple murder. He was converted around eight years after his incarceration through the ministry of a nun and a Christian ex-policeman. He knows he will never get out and so he spends his time seeking to evangelize his fellow inmates. To my knowledge, he has had some success in this.

My question is this, ‘Which is he more likely to successfully evangelize? His fellow inmates in Long Bay or a North Shore dentist who has lead what one might call a squeaky clean, exemplary life? The former, I think, don’t you? When we fail morally, we seriously limit our mission field. Having said that, all is not lost, especially when we confess our wrongdoing and take ownership of it. God can, and does, still use us. In fact, we may become a specialist in a niche market. As a recovering alcoholic and addict, I find it relatively easy to identify with and speak the words of eternal life to others like myself.

As noted several times already, this is an extremely important principle to bear in mind. Human beings discriminate. It’s just the way we are. The corporate high flyer will relate better to others of his ilk. The Christian who, in his former life, had done evil as a result of intense mental illness will be more effective amongst fellow sufferers than the average man on the street. And the average suburbanite will fare well amongst his/her peers.

David was a man after God’s own heart who fell a long way from a towering height. Be that as it may, the point I wish to make is that although his life fell into a pitiful state of moral decay, it wasn’t ‘game-over.’ He now had the potential to be profoundly effective amongst those who could relate to him and needed to be reminded of God’s compassionate and merciful nature. The salt has regained its saltiness – at least in part. And it came through honesty and transparency.

Regardless of whether we can regain some saltiness or not, it goes without saying, God’s intention is that we go about the business of kingdom building with a high level of moral integrity tempered with love and humility. And humility, I believe, is just as important as moral integrity. No one, and I mean ‘NO ONE,’ will listen if we have a holier than thou attitude.

If our faith is strong, our relationship with God sound and, as a result, we care deeply for those around us, we will remain salty and we will shed God’s light into the lives of others. It’s not astrophysics. It’s really very simple, Jesus issued two commands, ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength...and love your neighbour as yourself (Mark 12:30).’

Evangelism is anchored in love. If we truly love God we will reflect his character more and more, and our actions will speak volumes. And of course, the Holy Spirit is powerfully involved. What we have been talking about in this chapter is really nothing more or less than the process of sanctification, a work of the Spirit that brings positive transformation in every aspect of our lives. The more we surrender to Him, the greater and more amazing the transformation, and the more effective we are at spreading the gospel. Our very lives become a testimony to what we believe and thus, we are powerfully equipped to truly love our neighbours – to treat them with the utmost respect, compassion and care, and in so doing, see more opportunities to offer them the greatest gift a human being can possess – the forgiveness of God.

## 4. Who?

### Who do we approach?

Who should we seek to tell the gospel to? Answering in a general sense, we could rightly say, ‘Any one of the 5-6 billion or so unsaved citizens of the world.’ Big job – overwhelming task.

Some of you will undoubtedly remember racing driver Peter Brock, aka, ‘King of the Mountain’ – meaning Mt Panorama, Bathurst, where the famous Bathurst 500, and later the Bathurst 1000 car race has been held each October since 1963. Brock was victorious at the mountain 9 times and won the Australian Touring Car Championship 3 times. On the question of success he once quipped, ‘You bite off more than you can chew and then chew like hell.’<sup>13</sup> Should we be as ambitious and take the same approach as Brocky when it comes to evangelism?

### The door-knock, the street corner and the event.

Two of the methods to which one is exposed as a Theological college student are door-knocking and street corner (‘walk-up’) evangelism. These are extremely hard gigs. They require a cast-iron sense of self worth and an intellect to match. This is cold work. There is no warm up. You have to engage in a conversation about Jesus by the seat of your pants.

Usually, one will start with a question like, ‘Who do you say Jesus is?’ then at some point (if you’ve gotten that far) you can ask them the two EE (Evangelism Explosion) questions – 1) ‘If you were to die tonight do you think you would go to heaven?’ And 2) ‘On what grounds should God let you in?’ These are discussion starters designed to lead into opportunities to tell the gospel. Regardless of how charming, engaging and persistent you can be, the overwhelming majority of people will politely decline to speak with you. There are some, however, who, fuelled by their hatred of God, seize the moment and luxuriate in the opportunity to try and make you squirm. This is extremely hard work. This is the Peter Brock approach.

I’ve done a significant amount of these two methods over the years (much more door-knocking than street corner) and have had little success with either. Our Jehovah Witness friends have worn out the door knock. People have come to hate it. And street corner, I think, is increasingly being seen as the soap-box arena of the seriously deranged religious fanatic. If, before I became a Christian, I was ever approached by a street corner evangelist, I’d seek the most colourful language available to utterly ridicule him, then walk off leaving him to lick his wounds.

Where did these methods come from anyway? There’s hardly any trace of them in Scripture, if at all. I suppose we could point to the times where Jesus sent out his disciples on mission –

Luke 9:1-2

When Jesus had called the Twelve together, he gave them power and authority to drive out demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to preach the kingdom of God and to heal the sick.

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<sup>13</sup> The saying was originally used in the late 19<sup>th</sup> c to describe the right approach to using chewing tobacco.

– but really, were they not specially empowered and led for this specific job – a special case? Sure, it was a big ask. They were to take nothing with them and they were probably supposed to speak on street corners, or at least I assume so because Jesus told them to shake the dust off their heels if a whole town, not just a house, rejected them. It was certainly cutting edge stuff. However, the ability to heal must have made it so much easier. Surely this empowering would have been a terrific witness to the message they preached, and thus a great relief, for they could demonstrate that their message was backed up with real power.

I'm really delighted for them. It must have been an awe inspiring experience. In our case, however – and I speak for myself (under the assumption that most of us are in the same boat) – the last time I checked my in-tray, there was no such mandate from Jesus, and nor was there a special anointing from the Holy Spirit. Jesus' sending out of his disciples was a unique and special moment.

As for 'the event,' I speak broadly of any event, organized by Christians, that seeks to save the lost. These range from the, 'bring-a-mate' BBQ with guest speaker (carefully selected for their ability to explain the gospel with great clarity), to evangelistic rallies (Billy Graham style), and everything in between. Again, apart from the use of the lecture hall of Tyrannus (Acts 19:9) as a place for 'daily discussion' there is no Biblical warrant for 'the event.' They can, however, be really effective with the right organization, venue, speaker and follow-up. And, of course, if they are ordained by God, they will be dynamite.

However, just like the door knock and the street corner, the church event is limited to the principle of addition. Having said that, it is closer to the mark when it comes to understanding the necessity of relationship, which, incidentally, is practically ignored by both the street corner evangelist and the door knocker. While the Spirit certainly uses these three methods to his advantage in building the kingdom, there is a better way. A way that's not only more effective, but one, I believe, that also reflects more accurately the biblical data.

Bearing in mind these two ideas of addition and relationship, let us now explore God's word to see what he has to say about the most effective way to build his kingdom.

## **Addition or...**

One can readily be forgiven for misinterpreting God's strategy for the spread of the gospel when reading Acts 2. Here Peter preaches an impromptu sermon to a crowd that had gathered in Jerusalem for Pentecost and Luke notes in the final verse, '... and about three thousand were added to their number that day (Acts 2:41).' This is the principle of addition, and it can be amazingly successful in ushering a large volume of people into God's kingdom in a heartbeat. The Spirit chooses to move with great power and many lives are saved. One need only reflect on the great revivalist movements of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and the Graham Crusades of the twentieth century to see just how powerful it can be.

However, while addition is certainly a valid and spectacular approach on an occasional basis, it is not God's preferred option for the day to day building of his kingdom. Perfectly portrayed in the parable of the four soils, multiplication emerges as God's principle tool in spreading the message of the gospel.

In this parable – the greatest thrust of which is to explore different kinds of human hearts to determine the most likely type that will accept the word of God – Jesus adds an important dimension that must not be overlooked. The plant that grew out of the fertile soil, '... *once grown, produced*

fruit a **hundredfold** (Luke 8:8, writer's translation). This is pretty clear. The authentic Christian life is one that persistently and deliberately bears the fruit of the kingdom.<sup>14</sup>

You may have noticed that the Luke account of the parable has only the one number (The plant produced 100 times itself). Matthew and Mark (fuller accounts) say 30, 60, 100 times. Let's work with the lower figure so we don't get too overwhelmed.

How many people have come into God's kingdom because of your ministry to them? Maybe a few, maybe none as yet. It'll be different for different people. Imagine if the figure was 30? Or if you really caught on fire with the Spirit, 60 or 100 times (sorry, I know I said that we'd work with 30, but when it comes to kingdom building, I get a little carried away). Seriously, imagine if you were responsible for bringing 30 people into the kingdom throughout your life? And then each one of them, 30, and then each one of them, 30? It's like a chain reaction or an avalanche. It makes you want to weep pure tears of joy!

In the opening chapter I posed a theoretical scenario –

If, for each of us, it was our regular practice to bring just one person into God's kingdom every couple of years, and these new disciples were then encouraged and trained to do likewise – within 5 years our churches would be 4 times bigger.

It's not an unrealistic figure. In fact, it reflects the thirty-fold number in the parable – 30 (people saved) x 2 (years) = 60 years work. What I want to do now is explore the mathematical difference between addition and multiplication so that we can see at least one reason why God has ordained multiplication as the tool of choice.

The math is a little beyond me, so I posed this particular scenario (now using the 60 figure) to my mathematics professor friend. Suppose just **one** of us brought **2 people** into God's kingdom every **2 years** and each of those new disciples was trained and encouraged to do likewise, within 20 years a group of people the size of Australia's current population would be saved. That's mind boggling, and it started with just one person. Imagine if we all did it.

Matching this figure by addition is practically impossible. It would mean weekly rallies over that 20 years (1000 meetings), each attended by 80 000 people, assuming a 25% success or conversion rate (which is outrageously ambitious). It would be the revival to rival all revivals!

God uses both addition and multiplication to build his kingdom. However, multiplication emerges as the preferred option –

- a) because it is better (far more fruit)
- b) because it truly softens our heart to the plight of the unsaved, because –
- c) it gets **all** of us involved, and
- d) because it means building relationships and God is all about relationship

We need to see and understand that being involved in this work is a monumental privilege and one of the greatest joys a human being can ever experience.

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<sup>14</sup> The Parables of Jesus, Baker Book House, USA, 1986, Simon Kistemaker, p18. Kistemaker makes it clear that all the seed that fell anywhere but on the good soil, perished and was lost – ie, the fertile soil is the only soil that makes for an authentic follower of Christ.

## Relationship

Let us now turn to the work of arguably the greatest evangelist of all time, Saul of Tarsus, better known by the Greek version of his name, Paul. How did he go about the business of spreading the message of the good news of salvation in Christ?

Whenever Paul was asking himself the question, ‘Who should I approach?’ His answer, generally speaking, was his own countrymen scattered throughout Asia Minor, and the Gentiles who had joined them having converted to Judaism. This was his entry point in each new city. Remember the principle that it’s a forgiven sinner who can most effectively reach other sinners of a similar background. Undoubtedly led by the Spirit, Paul seems to have understood this principle. Just about everywhere he went, as outlined by Luke in Acts, he began at the local Synagogue.<sup>15</sup> He was thus strategically targeting those who already had a faith in the Living God as determined by the existing Scriptures, and were now, simply being introduced to the next and final phase of salvation history. He was thus in the business of, ‘...proving that Jesus was the Christ,’ an idea that appears numerous times in Acts.

I see little evidence, if any, that he just walked out onto the street and spoke to the passer-by, an approach more consistent with the various Greek philosophical schools of the day.<sup>16</sup> As far as I can tell, The New Testament evangelists seemed disinterested in this type of approach. In fact, if anything, all the relevant biblical data supports quite the opposite.

Admittedly, there were occasions where Paul evangelized certain individuals in public. But these were a far cry from the general practice of street corner evangelism. Rather, they were people he just seems to have stumbled upon in the course of his travels, although, in reality, we can probably assume that they were placed in his path by the Holy Spirit.

Thus far we see two strategies at work.

- 1) speaking to sizeable groups (synagogue gatherings) who already had part of God’s revelation, and
- 2) speaking to individuals placed in his path

However, when we read Paul’s words carefully and look a little more deeply at his movements, another strategy emerges to join the first two.

The believers that resulted from the two activities mentioned above formed small (usually home) churches where they were taught, by Paul and his associates, on how to live the Christian life. However, it also appears that these fledgling home churches probably became a platform from which to reach out to the surrounding community. Thus they served the dual role of making disciples and discipling at the same time.<sup>17</sup> Paul was a kingdom builder. He was therefore a relationship builder and devoted much of his time building bridges into people’s lives.

1 Thessalonians 2:8

We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God, but our lives as well because you had become so dear to us.

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<sup>15</sup> The only real departure from this strategy of beginning in the Synagogues seems to be his sojourn to the Aereopagus in Athens, the gathering place of the elite from the philosophical schools of the Stoic and Epicurean persuasions (Acts 17).

<sup>16</sup> Itinerant teachers would collar people in the market place, stir up a little controversy by inciting heated debate over a contentious issue thereby quickly generating a crowd of rubber-knecking onlookers to join the fray.

<sup>17</sup> We can rightly say here that the distinction between ‘making disciples’ and ‘discipling’ collapses, or rather, that the distinction is false. To make disciples means to bring them in and train them up. Certainly Paul would have seen it that way.

‘We loved you so much...’ ‘...you became so dear to us,’ ‘...delighted to share with you...our lives.’ This is not a street corner evangelist, and nor is it the work of the door to door salesman or a tent meeting evangelist. This is not the work of addition, but rather, the foundation for multiplication. It is the work of someone who really understood and truly valued the principle of relationship.

Multiplication works because it demands relationship which equals trust. Trust breeds multiplication because it demands relationship. Relationship is the key ingredient to multiplication because it breeds trust. Get it? No? Let me elucidate. Multiplication is largely a one to one ministry (although not always). For multiplication to really work, it demands that we invest ourselves into authentic, trusting, selfless relationships. From this platform we can tell the gospel to another person who may just listen and take the message seriously because they trust the messenger.

They might just trust the message if they feel they can trust the messenger! Let me just say that again in case you missed it.

They might just trust the message if they feel they can trust the messenger!

Paul’s letters are awash with his declarations of love and commitment to those he ministered to. But there was more. He also wanted to uphold the moral integrity of that ministry.

1 Thessalonians 2:3, 5-6, 10

...the appeal we make does not spring from error or impure motives, nor are we trying to trick you...You know we never used flattery, nor did we wear a mask to cover up greed – God is our witness. We were not looking for praise from men, not from you or anyone else. You are witnesses, and so is God, of how holy, righteous and blameless we were among you who believed.

Paul was careful to be above reproach and to be a man of love to those he sought to tell the gospel – the ministry of Salt and Love. A ministry which fused the ideals of rich moral character and love, expressed in selfless acts of service to others. This is the way he was. This is how he lived. He forged trusting relationships wherever he went which ultimately served as the platform from which he preached the gospel.

But aren’t these cases (especially the verses above) a matter of ministering to the converted – ie, aren’t they actually describing Paul’s relationship with existing churches as opposed to his evangelistic method? At one level, that’s true. However, it seems that his character was always the same, whether addressing the saved or those he was hoping to share the gospel with. In 1Thess 2:8, it seems that he loved them before he told them the gospel, and his appeal, as he puts it in v3, is clearly a present event (ie, ongoing). Besides, with just a little reverse engineering we might further ask, ‘does anyone really and honestly think he was any different when he first bowled into each town or city to launch each new ministry?’ I don’t think so!

This is the way he was. It was the way he had conducted himself with all people ever since that first dramatic meeting of Christ on the Damascus road. In gaining the trust and friendship of the members of the early infant churches he cultivated a reputation of being a man of sterling character. Each church grew on this basis. As he continued to model the Christian life, others followed and became models themselves, which undoubtedly engendered further growth. All of it built on the foundation of love, honesty and transparency. As he had evangelized them, so now they would go and do likewise to others.

It seems that the methods of door-knocking, street corner evangelism and organized evangelistic events were not really employed by the early church at all. Rather, they seem to have been developed as relatively recent initiatives adopted by a few select individuals, anointed by the Spirit, who could actually effectively carry them out. Thus we are talking about extremely outgoing, highly intelligent and educated, thick skinned salesman types, and most of us are not hard-wired that way. These methods are the playing fields of the specially gifted.

## **The way it is**

Let's see if any of this resonates with you.

The head Pastor of your church has a Holy Spirit moment of clarity where he sees the frightening level of the unsaved in his region (maybe he went to a footy match and was struck by the sheer volume of unsaved humanity). He is further moved by the Spirit to place evangelism at the top of the church's list of priorities. He summons the leadership team to discuss various ways of reaching the community. They hold lengthy meetings and develop a plan of attack. A 6 week sermon series on evangelism follows. A steering committee is formed and there are all sorts of ideas. 'First of all we're gunna go out and claim door-knocking back from the JW's!' Certain individuals (the most chatty, affable and confident) plan to open a stall at the local market. A youth event with live music is planned. There is a food drive to collect tinned food for the needy – a way of demonstrating our salt and light to the community. Various events with recognized guest speakers are planned. 'Bring a mate so he can hear an expert explain the gospel.' And so on and so on and so on.

Let's now assess this veritable bee-hive of activity with honesty and openness. Firstly, although well intentioned and full of passionate pleas regarding the urgency of evangelism, the 6 week sermon series seems oddly distant. Although it rightly continues to encourage the spread of the gospel through its own people, it doesn't actually offer them any clues on how to do it. If it's biblical it probably doesn't intersect with the types of activities the committee has planned. It can't because there's little, if any, biblical warrant for them.

And if it isn't biblical, but rather, constructed on pop-psychology, and or, social pragmatism, it may attract a crowd, but will it make for genuine disciples of Christ? Probably not, and thus, it will be of little or no use to anyone – ie, it will merely reflect the state of the seed that fell on the path, the stony ground and the thorny ground.

The door-knocking will fall flat on its face. As noted, the JW's have ruined any opportunity we may have had there. Besides, the reality is that most people will politely decline to speak with you. There may be a few interesting conversations, almost all of which will bear zero fruit. At the end of the day, most of the faithful will probably retreat to a well earned Radox bath, tired and weary (some may even have been ridiculed or verbally attacked) yet in the afterglow of satisfaction, thinking, 'At least I've done my bit,' and, 'but I'll never do it again!' Ultimately, nothing has been achieved under the sun.

The stall at the market is laudable if it's manned by really good people. However, my experience of these things is that the stall will be almost entirely ignored by the general public. Be that as it may, you may have some limited success. The 'bring a friend' church events also have some credibility, although they often bear little fruit and require an enormous amount of energy to stage. I've organized and run many of these and I've been the guest speaker at many.

These things simply don't pay the dividend that most ministers hope. The youth rally will almost certainly be the most successful. Statistically speaking, most people make an initial commitment to

Christ during their teenage years. I've spoken at a few of these events and seen an amazing movement of the Spirit each time. The food drive is a great idea as a PR exercise for elevating the profile and reputation of the church, but by itself does practically nothing in terms of kingdom building.

Let's now conduct a post mortem on 'mission month'

Door-knocking	0-1
The market stall	1-2
Food drive	0
Youth rally	5 (10 put up their hand at the appeal, but in 6-12 months 5 have fallen away.)
Various events	1-2

Two months work (6 weeks of preaching overlapping a month of outreach activity) and only 7-10 converts (and I'm being generous). Does any of this sound familiar?! Am I a pessimist, a nay-sayer? No, I'm a realist. Am I suggesting that 'mission month' should be scrapped? Absolutely not! It affords the church the opportunity to really work together as a team channeling their skills and talents into and towards a common goal. That's pure gold! More importantly, it's changed the eternal destination of 7-10 people. In many ways, it was nothing short of stunning.

But it can be better – much better, and with a lot less trauma!

Let me let you in on a little secret – something the average church member thinks they've managed to hide from us ministers over the years. Whenever we mention the word, 'evangelism' and make a bold bid to elevate its priority, we do actually notice how you cringe and bristle with unwillingness. Yes indeed, we see it alright. But we just ignore it, a) because we know our priorities are right, and, b) because it's our job to squeeze people out of their comfort zone and set the bar a whisker higher than they can jump. It's true, it is our job to do that, but not to the point of utilizing our people outside the scope of the gifts God has given them. Here's something you might find refreshing – I know your pain and I get where you're coming from! I too was once a parishioner.

The current state of play sees many churches either asking their people to do what they aren't gifted for, or throwing mountains of energy into low impact activities. Most parishioners will volunteer to assist, help, support, back up, set up, rack up, stack up, make sandwiches, tea, coffee, scones, hand out pamphlets and so on, during mission month, and they will work really hard. But they won't go on the frontline because they aren't hardwired that way. It's like trying to pump 200 watts of sound through a transistor radio speaker. It just blows the cone. Am I going soft on them? Am I letting them off the hook by giving them an excuse to hang in the kitchen and churn out another plate of sandwiches? Not in a million years. I just want to divert their skills, gifts and passions in a different direction. The Peter Brock approach is of no use to us. God neither expects it, nor endorses it (except perhaps with a very small handful of very gifted people).

## **The proposal – the way it should be**

A couple of hundred years ago, the church, in the western world, had a monopoly. That monopoly has since evaporated like a pool of water under the merciless sun of the Simpson Desert. We now live in a period of religious mistrust. For those who believe in the existence of God, some, a small number, will trickle into our churches and get saved. A much greater number are either exploring other faiths, ignoring the 'God' question altogether, or simply making it up as they go along. Disinclined to align themselves with any one belief system at all, more and more people are seeking to apprehend spiritual fulfillment by taking the smorgasbord approach – picking and choosing the

choicest morsels from every type of belief. A tailor-made religion to suit the individual. This has become known as the ‘New Age’ movement or phenomenon.

Our culture is stranded in a desert of religiosity. Mirage after mirage promises living water, yet there is nothing but unrelenting thirst. They have no discernment, so they fool themselves into believing that each mirage is real. Thus, they have given themselves to the tragic deception that any path will get them to god (he/she/it/them) so long as they’re sincere and devout. Apparently, all roads lead to Rome. Each individual has developed a personal construct – their own brand of truth – and it works for them, at least for the moment. And they tenaciously cling to it as they slowly die of thirst.

But herein lies the difficulty. God is asking us to take it away from them. Like ripping a dummy from a baby’s mouth, which, of course, creates nothing but antagonism and resentment. Unless you can offer them something better (and convince them that it really is better) they will continue to wander the dunes aimlessly until they perish while attempting to drink the sand.

Why should your friend go to a church event or Christian rally to hear a complete stranger drone on and on about the Jesus he’s already rejected?! Do you see the problem? What we need to do is to establish, or re-establish (whatever the case may be) a platform of trust.

At the beginning of the chapter we asked the question, ‘Who?’ Thus far it may seem like we’ve been focusing more on the, ‘How.’ While in one sense, that’s true, it’s only in asking, ‘how’ (which we’ve only tackled in part anyway) that we can answer the, ‘who’ question. The ‘how’ is clear – by building bridges of trust into the lives of others by being Salt and Light, by good deeds done out of our love for Christ, and to live morally exemplary lives. Now the ‘Who’ should answer itself.

Our mission field is simply those around us – all those whom God has placed in our path. Family members, friends, work associates and neighbours. Ultimately, this may be a network of as many as 40-50 people, but in reality, there are probably only 10 (or less) that will emerge as possible gospel candidates. This is where God expects us to minister. This is our coal face.<sup>18</sup>

Brothers and sisters, we are standing on un-trodden ground. Never before has the Christian faith been under the level of suspicion and ambivalence it is now. Corruption and moral failure of some of our leaders, perceived intolerance towards minorities (especially gays), perceived tolerance and even protection of pedophiles have done significant damage to our reputation. Whether they’re true or not is irrelevant. They have transformed the attitude of the public. Moreover, as Darwin’s theory has practically become law in the minds of many, and people have gorged themselves on the belief that we’re nothing more than sophisticated monkeys, we are now viewed as children who cling to fairy tales and refuse to grow up. This is the new world that has emerged from the age of reason, whether we like it or not.

All that remains is the question, ‘What are we going to do about it?’ In the world I just described, to whom will they listen? The street corner evangelist? The door knocker? The itinerant speaker doing the church event circuit? Maybe, but it’s becoming less and less likely. They are much more liable to at least give fair consideration to our message if they hear it from a messenger they know and trust. That means you.

God is building his kingdom and we are his labourers. Our task is to bear fruit, 30-60-100 times. Through us, God is building his kingdom – one brick at a time. This is our job – one brick at a time.

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<sup>18</sup> This was/is the thrust of the Sydney Anglican Diocesan initiatives, ‘Connect 09’ and ‘Connect for Life’.

## 5. Do's and Don'ts

### Final prep

Having thought about those around us and prayed for their hearts to soften, and having prayed for a deep passion to do the work, for opportunities to arise, for the means (that words might be given) and for courage – and having examined ourselves and made sure that we're being the salt of the earth and the light and love of Christ to those around us, we are now ready for the ministry of the word.

The first thing that must be said is that there is no universal panacea that will cure the non believer of his/her unbelief. The gospel is what it is. It cannot be changed. It can, however, be presented in a multitude of ways – and thus, what works for one person might not work for another. In other words, there is a great deal of freedom in how we go about the business of alerting someone to their need for Jesus. Having said that, there are some things that are absolutely *essential* (must not be missed), and others, that we must *not* say or do.

### What not to do

Whatever you do –

#### Do not

1) Unless qualified, attempt to prove the existence of God. The secular world prides itself in believing it has all the right ammunition in its armoury to annihilate these arguments. The fall back position of most people (and they don't have to be very intelligent) is that evolution<sup>19</sup> has been proven in all its glory (even though it hasn't – not by any means) and therefore, the principle of natural selection trumps God. They have believed the lie that God, and some form of evolutionary process,<sup>20</sup> are mutually exclusive.

To enter into this type of arena, one needs to be really well educated in, and conversant with, current discoveries in the fields of Biology and Physics, have the capacity to argue reasonably, and to think quickly on the fly. This excuses most of us. In any case, these discussions are generally a waste of time, even for the highly educated, and usually achieve nothing but a deepening divide between both parties who ultimately retreat into the safety of their own beliefs.

This discussion hinges around pre-history. Better to steer the conversation into the realm of ancient history and offer up every proof you can for the life, death and resurrection of Christ (see appendix). If Jesus rose from the dead, God exists!

#### Do not

2) Fall into the trap of exaggerating or lying (stretching the truth) to make a point. The ends don't justify the means. It will leave you feeling guilty and it offers the person you're witnessing to

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<sup>19</sup> I wish to draw a necessary distinction between 'divergent' (macro) and 'convergent' (micro) evolution. The former – which I dispute strenuously because of the monumental lack of evidence for it – asserts the progressive transformation of living entities from one species to another by means of natural selection (survival of the fittest). The latter, what many refer to as adaptation, has more than sufficient evidence to be credible. References to evolution in this work are limited to the former unless otherwise stated.

<sup>20</sup> Here, we mean convergent evolution, which by all accounts appears to be part of the fabric of God's design in all living things.

every opportunity to further validate their own position. Besides, at one level, it doesn't matter. You can't change them. You've done what God has asked you to do. We give them all we've got, and then leave them in God's hands. Paul writes –

2Corinthians 4:2

...we have renounced secret and shameful ways – we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God.

### **Do Not**

3) Attempt to win the discussion by ridiculing the other person's beliefs. Remember this passage from 1Peter?

1Peter 3:15

But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.

But there's more. He goes on by adding, '*...but do this with gentleness and respect.*' The other person will almost certainly attempt to ridicule your faith. Don't play the game. Your discussion will go down the toilet and become an argument, perhaps even heated. Stay calm – lay the gospel on the table – know when to walk away.

### **Do Not**

4) Fool yourself into thinking that you have to hit a home run on the first meeting. You don't. You're not just telling them the gospel. You're actually in the process of dismantling their belief system. This may take considerable time as they continue to ponder the things you've discussed.

### **Do Not**

5) Attempt to answer questions you don't know the answer to. This is a real killer. You will only cultivate contempt if you give ridiculous answers to cover up ignorance. If you don't know, admit it openly. Write it down and explain to the other person that you will attempt to find out the answer and get back to them. Don't be afraid of this type of situation. It's actually a good sign. It means that the discussion, self evidently, has developed to the point where they are actually listening and playing with the ideas.

### **Do not**

6) Try and cover every nuance of the gospel. It's not necessary. They only need to start with the basics. There's plenty of time to delve into deeper, more complex and more challenging issues raised in the Scriptures. These are the necessary things they need to know

- a) God is King and we are rebels in a state of treason against the crown
- b) Because we are rebels we deserve the death penalty
- c) Because of his love, God is prepared to pay the penalty for us (the cross)
- d) We can receive this blessing only by accepting Jesus as our Lord and Saviour
- e) And we are assured of it because Jesus rose from the dead.

**Do not**

7) Give books away that explain the gospel as an alternative to doing the work. They will almost always be graciously accepted and ungraciously never read. This is the lazy option. If all you're prepared to do is hand out Christian publications, your success rate at being a kingdom builder will almost certainly be negligible, and if not, entirely void of success. Think back to the time before you got saved. Would you have read a book about God when all it did was eat into your precious reading time which has already been devoted to devouring the latest John Grisham novel? I seriously doubt it. I wouldn't have.

**Do not**

8) Try and excuse or diminish the mistakes of other Christians (we've already dealt with the issue of our own mistakes in an earlier chapter). The person you're trying to evangelize may counter some of your arguments by pointing to the failure of other Christians. This is an attempt at avoiding the truth by employing the smokescreen of accusation. 'Your God can't be real otherwise his people would be better behaved!' Actually, it's a good point. Remember, we are supposed to be salt and light, and people seem to know this.

We don't sweep the ugly side of Christianity under the rug. People aren't stupid. They can smell a cover-up from a mile away. We don't make excuses about the Crusades or wars fought in the name of Christ, or pedophiles in churches, or the greed of some Christians. We simply listen until our friend has made their point, openly acknowledge the fault of those involved, and point out that their behaviour reflects nothing of what Jesus taught.

Sometimes the person has been badly hurt by a Christian. We need to try and read between the lines of what they are saying, understand their legitimate complaint and express our sorrow for their pain. Remember, transparency is critical, and in such a case, it will contribute greatly to the healing of their wound.

**Do not**

9) Allow yourself to fall into the trap of spewing forth a whole pile of theological jargon. It's condescending to your listener. Words like justification, sanctification, atonement, regeneration and so on are meaningless to the non-believer. Try and find short phrases to use as synonyms – eg, for 'justification' one might substitute something like, 'made right with God.' Or for atonement, the word reconciliation is a good substitute. Regeneration becomes, as Jesus taught Nicodemus, to be born again.

**Do Not**

10) Attempt to explain the Trinity unless they expressly ask you to. It's confusing enough for Christians to understand let alone someone whose regular categories of thought never really penetrate the realm of genuine spirituality. It's probably best to describe Jesus in terms of his identity as 'God incarnate.' Thus you can say, 'God in the flesh' or 'God disguised in human skin' or 'God dwelling among us' or 'God come to visit.'

Furthermore, the topic of predestination should also be avoided at all cost at this stage!

**Do not**

11) Fool yourself into thinking that when your listener agrees to be lead through a prayer of confession of faith that you've snared yourself a real life disciple. You may have, but then again, you may not. They may simply have been swept away by the intense emotions of the moment. Certainly, a seed has been sown which may even have sprouted. That much is true otherwise they probably wouldn't have prayed the prayer. But it remains to be seen whether or not they have fallen onto good soil, amongst the thorns or on stony ground (Matt 13:1-23).

In the great commission, Jesus appears to give his disciples two instructions, 1) making disciples, 2) teaching them to obey. However, closer scrutiny reveals that there is really only one instruction. The making of disciples includes teaching them to obey (as noted in an earlier footnote). If your listener has sprouted amongst thorns or on stony ground, they will need extra care, better soil, extra fertilizer, more water, etc. In real terms, this probably demands a more personal level of discipleship. In other words, you can't make a convert, and say to yourself, 'Job done!' and then abandon them. They need to be nurtured.

### **Do not**

12) Tamper with the gospel. It is as pure as the driven snow. It must not – under any circumstances – be watered down!

One of the greatest difficulties we face is that the gospel is offensive to the non-believer. Even though, from a human perspective, he/she may very well be a 'good citizen,' the gospel accuses them of being sinners, and further, that without Christ, their destination is hell regardless of whatever good works they may have accumulated. To many non-believers, the idea that they could, in any way, be considered to be on equal footing before God along with murderers and rapists is utterly perverse. But that is the truth. It cannot be avoided. This is why it's tempting to sugar coat the gospel and leave out the parts we know will bring offence.

The two ideas of sin and hell are particularly troublesome. We live in a culture where tolerance is the sacred mantra of our time. People have been encouraged to exercise their rights and to do as they please and thus Divine judgement and punishment are way off the radar. This is an era where nobody wants to take responsibility for wrongdoing. We'll look more deeply at ways of explaining sin and hell in the next chapter – ways that make them easier to understand without undermining their importance or severity.

### **What to do**

Whatever you do –

#### **Always**

1) As Peter admonished his readers – be prepared. Be ready and alert for opportunities. You've prayed for them haven't you? Remain sharp. Preparedness functions at three levels.

**Firstly**, arm yourself with a thumbnail gospel presentation. 'Two Ways to Live' is brilliant. Learn the diagrams and the verses and be able to present them at any stage. Explain each drawing and ask the other person what they think so as to keep them engaged. You don't have much time. In my experience, there is a small window that opens for around 5 minutes or less. Paul was right when he said –

2Corinthians 4:3-4

...the gospel is veiled to those who are perishing. The god (the devil) of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ...

And because they've been blinded, any time you have where they are alert enough to catch the implications of what you are saying is extremely short. Then the shutters go up. It's amazing to see. It's as if some sort of spiritual catatonia has descended upon their psyche. It's all over, and they can

no longer hear you, and nor do they want to. You must get to the heart of the matter as quickly as possible.

You can recite a carefully selected verse of Scripture that is particularly relevant to the individual (try and avoid reading it – reciting or even paraphrasing is much better). Someone who is dying of an incurable disease should hear about the thief on the cross next to Jesus who, with no time left, was accepted into God’s kingdom purely on the basis of a confession of faith. Someone who has led a life of promiscuity and feels worthless and unforgiveable should hear about how Jesus saved the adulteress from the men who wanted to stone her. You know your Bible, use it.

Romans 6:23 is a great gospel presentation all by itself. ‘The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.’ A simple explanation of this verse unpacking each term (wages, sin, death, gift, eternal life) not only creates discussion, but covers all the rudimentary elements of the gospel. Personally, I prefer to trim the message of the Bible down even further into three short statements.

**God creates – Man corrupts – God pays the penalty.**

While this is a gross oversimplification, it represents the main themes that God has presented us with in his word. Each of these statements simply act as a main heading from which a whole host of other critical biblical truths can be hung. For example –

**God creates:**

- God is creator, the one who commands matter to exist and fashions it according to his will
- God is alone – he is one
- God is sovereign – he is king
- God is bigger than the universe
- God is a God of relationship. He is Trinity and thus treasures relationship.
- God makes man in his image to be in perfect relationship with him, and yet
- God is fully self sufficient and doesn’t need us. etc.

The same thing can be done with the other two statements – **Man corrupts** (the doctrine of sin, independence, evil, judgement and justice, the emergence of death, and so on) **God pays the penalty** (promises to Abraham, the model of salvation [Israel], promise and fulfillment, prophecy – the identity, teachings, death, resurrection and ascension of Christ, the nature of faith, the divinity of Christ, salvation, heaven, judgement day, hell etc). And thus the above axiom encapsulates much of what the Bible has to say. However, one needs to add at some stage that – **God pays the penalty, but only for those who are in Christ**

Remember, we’re not just spewing these things out ad infinitum. They’re just in our bag of tricks, ready to be revealed if and when appropriate. At the end of the day, it really amounts to possessing a sound and rich understanding of our faith.

Alternatively, you can use Jesus’ own gospel presentation at the beginning of Mark’s Gospel –

Mark 1:15

The time has come. The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!

This small cluster of statements highlights 5 important biblical ideas, the implications of which embrace most of the critical themes in the Bible.

**The time has come.** God is the Sovereign Lord who brings order out of chaos. He has everything planned out and everything happens according to his will and at the appointed time.

**The Kingdom of God is near.** God is king. Again, he is sovereign, which, in turn, reminds us that he is the architect of all things. As king, God has been building his kingdom ever since the fall in Genesis 3. He spoke through the prophets to reveal his plans of salvation both to Israel (the model) and later, the whole world, and to declare Jesus, the second person of the trinity, the agent of salvation. The revelation of God is progressive in character utilizing the principle of promise and fulfillment as it unfolds in real history. As Jesus makes this declaration, the latest and greatest phase of construction is dawning. God has come near in Christ and ultimately, all things will be restored in Him. The kingdom is both now and not yet at the same time – a WIP (a work in progress).

**Repent.** Sin (rebellion) – which is universal in scope (Romans 3:23), has separated us from God. We are going in the wrong direction. We need to turn around and we need to seek God with all our heart. Why? Because we were created to be in relationship with him and without him we face an eternity of misery.

**Believe.** Have faith – an activity that incorporates both intellectual belief and the practice of the values of that belief based on trust in the essential goodness of God (ie, the recognition that he is always right and that he always has our best interests at heart).

**The good news.** The good news is that although we live our lives in ignorance of, and even in hostility towards God, he wants us to be reconciled to him. He is summoning us to repent. Out of his love for us he meets the cost of our rebellion, in Christ, so that reconciliation might be realized – if we want it.

God is building his kingdom! The bottom line is that we are sinners in need of a saviour.

**God creates – man corrupts – God pays the penalty for those who accept Christ –  
God is building his kingdom**

We'll look in more detail at these sorts of preparations in the next chapter.

More than ever before (possibly because we live in the age of science and reason), people want proof of truth. If so, then let's give it to them. Be prepared to offer source material from outside the Bible (see appendix). Know a little about archaeological finds that support biblical history (Lion Handbook to the Bible is a great rudimentary source). Most importantly, put together an apologetic on the resurrection (see appendix). It is the hinge. Everything hangs on it. Paul was dead right when he explained to the church in Corinth that –

1 Corinthians 15:14

...if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith.

Without the resurrection, there is no Christianity and we may as well all pack up and go play lawn bowls or golf on a Sunday morning. Conversely, the truth of the resurrection means that Jesus is who he said he was and that God's judgement for sin is an unavoidable reality. Proof of the resurrection, and its implications properly explained, demands a response.

**Secondly**, as noted earlier, and point I wish to continue to stress, remember to understand who you are talking with. Where do they come from? What is their cultural heritage? What do they believe? Do some homework! What are some of the obstacles that might prove difficult for you in explaining the gospel and for them in understanding it?

– be prepared to play on their home-ground. Paul did that wherever he went. He would usually start at the local synagogue so that he could persuade his own people who were already monotheists and worshipped YHWH, and were expecting the promised Christ/Messiah to appear. However, when he went to Athens, he took a completely different approach with the philosophical stronghold of the Areopagus. Instead of ‘proving that Jesus is the Christ,’ (which was meaningless to them) he changed gear and talked about God as the Father figure of all mankind (the sovereignty of God) who calls all men everywhere to repent (Acts 17:30). In 1 Corinthians he writes –

1 Corinthians 9:19b, 22b

...I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible...I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some.

He didn’t become a believer in Zeuss to save the Greeks. He didn’t become a pagan to win the pagan. He didn’t engage in emperor worship to attract those who venerated the emperor. He just sat amongst these people, ate with them, built friendships and trust, shared his life. He waited for the right opportunity, the right opening, to preach Christ, and then he seized it with both hands.

We don’t become a Moslem or a Hindu in order to preach Christ. We get in amongst them and establish trust. Then we can preach Jesus. Regarding the above passage, Gordon Fee comments that Paul was merely explaining ‘...his apparently chameleonly stance in matters of social relationships.’<sup>21</sup> That’s what it means to be all things to all men. Know a little of what they think about God and the afterlife so that the discussion doesn’t disintegrate because of cultural differences.

For example – some years ago I worked with a Muslim. Knowing that parts of the Koran resembled parts of the Old Testament, I thought I could talk to him about how Jesus replaced the sacrificial system under the old covenant. He just looked at me as if I was speaking a foreign language. The sacrificial system outlined for Israel for the forgiveness of sin in the Bible is conspicuously absent from the Koran (this I didn’t know). The discussion simply went south from there. He could not understand how God needed a sacrifice for forgiveness to take place, and I was too ill-equipped at the time to demonstrate that it’s not just a matter of forgiveness, but a matter of justice as well. God is not only the forgiver, he is also the perfect justice system and, as such, justice must be satisfied.

Faced with the same situation now, I would probably start with God’s love (practically non-existent in the Koran) and because of his love, he doesn’t expect us to turn ourselves inside out attempting to impress him. Matt 11:28 is perfect. ‘Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.’ I would attempt to get my listener to understand that God is relational and wants us to know him in a personal way. While to the Muslim these things might well be just as alien as the notion of a sacrificial system, they will at least be far more appealing, for their god, Allah, is a hard and unrelenting taskmaster.

How do we approach a Hindu or anyone else who might believe in reincarnation and karma? How do we speak to a Catholic who venerates Mary? How do we approach the atheist, or the agnostic, or the average modern man captivated by lust because of free access to internet porn, or the JW, the Mormon, and so on? We need to do some homework. The gospel is one size fits all. However, it might be important which part of the garment goes on first.

**Thirdly**, try to anticipate difficult questions and topics. There are many that the non-believer might ask or bring up in an attempt to muddy the waters and deny Jesus as the truth. The latest, of course, is

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<sup>21</sup> NICNT, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, Eerdmans Publishing, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1987, Gordon Fee, p423.

the issue of gay marriage. This is easily answered when you know how (we'll look in more detail at these sorts of objections in ch6).

Be ready – be prepared.

1 Peter 3:15b  
Always be prepared...

**Always**

2) As previously stressed, be gentle and respectful. We will never win others over if we deride or mock what they currently believe. We need to be patient and have listening ears so that they can see that we respect them. Remember, they think they are just as right as we do. And while we are perfectly aware that we're in the heat of the battle over the eternal security of their soul, they are not. To them, we're actually intruding on their space as we attempt to dissuade them of their false belief. To us it's a battle – to them it's a discussion – one that will end very abruptly if we start treading all over their toes.

**Always**

3) Make sure you don't just talk about God in general terms. Your listener needs to know that there is one God and one Saviour Jesus Christ. Get the name 'Jesus' into the discussion as much as you can. There is no other name under heaven by which men can be saved.

**Always**

4) Be prepared to let them go. You can adopt the 'persistence is rewarded' approach, which may just infuriate them. Or, you can lay the gospel at their feet, leave them be (if it is the signal they're giving off), and then commit them to prayer. The latter will at least not make an enemy of you, and thus, may also leave a gap in the door for a future approach.

Statistically, you can't expect any more than around 10-15% of those to whom you speak to seriously engage in the discussion. Tragically, only a handful will accept the gospel. When it becomes obvious that they really don't want to know about God, then let them go. You've done what God has asked of you. They are now in his hands.

## 6. In the Field

### The golden (gold plated) platter

Sometimes the work will be handed to us on a golden platter. Occasionally, and somewhat surprisingly, someone we've been praying for will actually come to us. The Spirit is already at work in them and they are ready to embrace Jesus. All we have to do is ask a simple question, 'Do you want to get right with God?'<sup>22</sup> Sometimes they're ready to say, 'Yes,' simply because they may have arrived at the crossroads of dissatisfaction – the Solomon Syndrome – no more worlds to conquer. They have achieved a lot in life, manage their own business, own a big home, are surrounded by loved ones, yet they have come to a point where, although they are filled, they find themselves in a nagging state of unfulfillment. They have everything, yet they are empty. This is fruit ripe for the picking. All they need is a gentle nudge into the realm of genuine faith and to be introduced to Jesus.

Alternatively, someone answering, 'Yes,' to the above question might not be suffering the Solomon Syndrome at all, but rather, may be caught in a situation of intense personal crisis. In this case, the response will be like that of a drowning man who sees you as his last, and perhaps only, hope of being rescued. In this situation, the individual in question may not have been all that far from taking some sort of drastic action, maybe even suicide.

I've used this method twice in recent times. One of the subjects was in hospital suffering severe seizures and the other was a suicide survivor. Reading between the lines in each of the two cases, I felt it was more appropriate, and thus more profitable, to go one step beyond the simple invitation and opt for the more direct approach. 'Joe, you need to stop mucking around and get right with God!' – 'Susan, God has given you a reprieve. Suicide doesn't fix anything. All you achieve is going from the pan into the fire! It's time to get with the programme and get right with God?'

While such an approach may seem more like an ambush, or preying on the vulnerable, my conscience is absolutely clear. They were both ambushes, and I'm OK with that. Bottom line – they needed to know the truth. Besides, in both cases they nodded their assent to my challenge with a solemn expression, joined me in a prayer of confession and accepted Jesus into their heart as their Lord and Saviour. Twelve months in and 'Joe' is doing really well. With Susan, it remains to be seen how things unfold, for it was literally only two days ago I challenged her in the hospital where she is recovering. Both need back-up from the church. And both need continued spiritual nourishment and fellowship to grow in their faith. Susan will need considerable help and support over the first 12 – 24 months.

While the golden platter type conversion can be an amazing experience for both you and him/her, it often comes with a serious price tag. The platter is actually only gold plated. Underneath, it's only copper, bronze, aluminium or some other ignoble metal. If they are the over-achiever, they may have an enormous ego. If so, they will instantly see what the church is doing wrong (ie, their own perception) and will seek to be involved in everything. They will need to learn humility. Who will teach them?

If you have caught them only a heartbeat away from a complete meltdown, they will almost certainly accept Christ, but they will also want to cling to you like a Sydney rock oyster. This is the last thing

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<sup>22</sup> When they answer, 'yes' you are then in the position to lead them through some steps that we will outline later in the chapter.

you want. They need to learn to be utterly dependent on Christ. You may need to lead them in the direction of some professional help. In this case, it's time to batten down the hatches and pray hard. Pray for God to give you discernment so you can help them in the most appropriate fashion as a newborn baby Christian.

## The grand opening

What are the right words? How do I get it started? Where do I begin?

Sometimes people will actually present you with the opportunity themselves. Referring to the weather, they might say, 'Well, the Man upstairs has brought us some great weather today.' Or, referring to a natural disaster where tens of thousands of people have been killed, they might say, 'I don't know how anyone can believe in a God who lets this sort of thing happen.' Or, 'What's wrong with these Christians? What's the big problem with gay marriage?' These are genuine opportunities, and they should be seized, depending on our level of ability to explain such topics as God's reluctance to interfere in disaster or his position on human sexuality.

However, more than merely **taking** opportunities – which can sometimes be perilous if you're not a spontaneous person – I really want to sell you on the idea of **creating** opportunities.

And this is my method –

Having made all the necessary preparations, as discussed throughout this work, I approach someone I want to evangelize and make this simple request. 'Hey Joe, I want you to give me ten minutes to tell you why I believe what I believe.'

This is the foundation upon which everything rests. I believe it is the easiest and most effective way to generate a discussion about Jesus. Let me just say it again, and put it in bold –

**'Hey Joe, I want you to give me ten minutes to tell you why I believe what I believe.'**

Here are three reasons why this is a good way in.

1) It's non-confrontational. At this point it doesn't have to be. There's plenty of time to turn up the gas on the grill later if it seems like it will be helpful. The great thing about starting this way is that you haven't actually asked them to believe anything. You're only explaining why you believe what you believe with a view to generating a conversation. This is the target – to generate discussion.<sup>23</sup> Because you haven't 'Bible bashed' them or twisted their arm, you are demonstrating respect for their space. This respect will probably be reciprocated. They will appreciate that you haven't attempted to corner them and thus they are more likely to take the topic seriously. Furthermore, they may well be more agreeable to revisit the issue at a later date.

2) You're the one who initiated the discussion. You are therefore, at least to some extent, the one who has control over it. Remember, you've asked them to listen while you explain.

3) You're only asking for ten minutes which is easy enough for most people to spare. As noted earlier, you don't get very long with most people in a spontaneous situation (usually around 5mins). However, because you've asked for ten and they have agreed, they will probably stick to their side of the bargain. A lot can be achieved in ten minutes. This is why I developed the slogan

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<sup>23</sup> This is the crux of the programme, 'Just Start Talking' pioneered by Jim Ramsey and presented by Colin Buchanan and Samantha Boog

## **God creates – man corrupts – God pays the price**

Ironically, occasionally, having asked for only ten minutes you may just find yourself in a discussion lasting several hours. This is pure gold! This is what you're banking on!

### **Why do you believe?**

If you're going to start by making the abovementioned request then it's absolutely essential to be able to answer the question clearly in your own mind. Ask yourself, 'Why do I believe? What are the things that continually keep the fires of faith burning within me?'

For me there is an amalgam of things. Firstly, the reality of God in my life – the way he saved me from drugs and alcohol, and the way he continues to provide for, protect, guide and lead both my family and myself. Secondly, the wonderful unity of the word of God that traces salvation history through the promises to Abraham, the formation of Israel and the coming of Christ. Thirdly, the self authenticating nature of the Old Testament in the fulfillment of predictive prophecy regarding both Israel and Christ. But, at the end of the day, the thing that always sets my ship to rights in choppy waters is the historical reality of the resurrection.

**It's not important for you to explore why you believe and to be definite about it –  
it's absolutely critical**

You may wish to tell a little of your own story and how you came to faith in the first place. Personal testimony anchors the gospel in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It's a touch of reality where others can literally see what Jesus has really done for you. Some years ago I started writing a book about some of my experiences before I got saved. The following is a short extract from that work.

'Listen up people...in case you hadn't noticed, this is not the Ritz – it's not the Hilton and it's not the Hyatt. See those little black dots on the ceiling? That's fly crap...' The funny little bearded man with the clipboard paused for dramatic effect then continued with the briefing as he had done on countless other occasions such as this.

'Make no mistake,' he added melodramatically, 'You're in serious trouble my friends. This is the toilet, and you are its excrement. No-one cares. This place only exists on its shoestring budget because the government wants to make it look like they care, but really, they couldn't give a flying toss whether you lived or died. I kid you not! This is the nut-house and if you want to survive, then you are the ones who have to care.'

The gnome droned on, further outlining the various rules and routines of the establishment, but I'd zoned out, preoccupied with the little black dots, fly droppings apparently, that had accumulated on the Art Deco cornice now yellowed and crumbling with age.

I surveyed my new surroundings – the décor. Décor? Could one use such a word to describe a place like this? Probably not – the peeling paintwork, sour smell of decay, ancient dilapidated furniture and shiny, stained, tattered, and threadbare carpets all bore testimony to the truth that the excrement of the world, a sub-species that now apparently included myself, had indeed resided here for many years.

This once stately old 'South Dowling Street' manor with its high ceilings and sweeping staircases had become the temporary dwelling and treatment centre for countless thousands of alcoholics and addicts – a constant stream of sick and sorry humanity flushed, as it were, through the system – week after week, month after month, year after year – clinging precariously to life, clinging to the barest shred of sanity, most losing the battle and returning to their life in the gutter. Everything once grand was now discoloured, disfigured, tainted, chipped, worn, perishing – both building and occupants alike.

How on earth had everything gone so appallingly pear-shaped? I was afraid, filled with a sense of dread. What exactly fuelled the fear, I couldn't say. Not yet anyway. It was just a constant companion – always there, always laboriously and incessantly weaving its dark magic into my troubled soul. Having endured the delirium tremens, a state of alcoholic withdrawal characterized by uncontrollable shaking, horrific hallucinations, incessant itching and sweating, I had checked into this institution because I'd gone as far down the toilet as I wanted to go. The guy up the front was right. This was not the Ritz, it was a nightmare. Over the period of a decade the quality of darkness that had gradually descended on my world was exquisite, like a substance – heavy, tangible, oppressive.

The old man sitting alone in the corner continued mumbling incoherently to himself, rocking, swaying – the acrid stench of urine emanating from his five dollar suit continuing to waft pervasively throughout the room. This was the end of the line. I wasn't really like these people – I mean, you know – I wasn't one of them, was I? How had everything gone so terribly wrong? A question I had plenty of time to consider.

The daily ritual was simple enough – breakfast at eight, a variety of chores then a group therapy session where humiliation, the master tool of recovery, was wielded like a machete. This was followed by morning tea, a lecture, lunch, more chores, a one-on-one session with one of the 'psyches', afternoon tea, another group session, spare time, dinner, kitchen duty, then off to one of the countless local AA meetings.

This routine dragged on day after day and, as far as I was concerned, was about as useful as udders on a bull. Although I was now utterly ashamed of what I had become I couldn't see how 'the programme' was going to change anything. I was still me, a square peg in a round hole. I was still tainted and marred by chronic self loathing and deep in the fabric of my personality, still an alcoholic and addict with a powerful and infuriating desire to self destruct. The three weeks I'd agreed to and signed off on ground inexorably towards the end of the second week and recovery seemed as elusive as catching an eel with my bare hands.

After a fortnight of this cycle of sessions, lectures and meetings, the fear I'd walked in the front door with two weeks earlier had now intensified, caramelized. Fear had given way to terror. I desperately wanted visitors so I could anchor myself in the real world, yet the thought of speaking to anyone was petrifying. Any loud noise made me jump. If anyone called my name I shrank and just wanted to hide. If this was sobriety, I didn't want it. I was stuck in a nightmare. I couldn't go back to where I'd come from – that much was clear. The last six months of my drinking career had been nothing short of hell. And I couldn't go forward – I'd lost whatever ability I ever had to function in the world and simply couldn't see how I would ever recover – a quivering rabbit caught in a trap staring down the barrel of the hunter's shotgun. Nowhere to go, nowhere to run, nowhere to hide.

They say that it's always darkest just before the dawn. Whether or not it's universally true, I don't know, but it was certainly true of the circumstance in which I found myself in that rehab centre all those years ago. It all happened in the dead of night at around 3:00am. I had gone to bed around ten thirty, but tossed and turned for hours engulfed in a cocoon of mesmerising and sinister apprehension. I couldn't sleep, what was the point in trying?

I got up, made my way to the smoking room on the top floor, threw open a window overlooking a perfectly traffic free and tranquil South Dowling Street and lit a smoke. For some reason, and I don't know why, it was at this exact point in time fear suddenly gave way to anger. I was furious, incensed, outraged. If there was a God, how dare he have the temerity to create a being such as myself – a being of such loathing and desolation and with such a maniacal will to self-destruct.

I was furious and decided to let him know all about it in an outpouring of abusive, aggressive, foul and violent invective – a tirade of some twenty minutes where I gave God the thick edge of my tongue. If he was the creator, he had drastically screwed up. He was a miserable failure and I left no stone unturned in telling him so.

Having vented my spleen and exhausted the worldwide compendium of abuse, insults and expletives I ran out of steam, and filled with grief and despair, fell deathly quiet. As far as I can remember there was no reason, rational thought, wisdom or logic involved in what happened next,

only a desperate plea from a drowning man. In what I often refer to as the most genuine, sincere and authentic moment of my entire life, and with tears streaming down my face, I asked the God whom I had just finished condemning with an avalanche of abuse if he would help. It was short and to the point and came from the deepest pit of my being.

‘God, if you are really there, I’m sorry – I need your help.’ That was all, simple and to the point. There was no fanfare, no voice booming out of heaven, no message, no epiphany or theophany, no visitation, no riveting event, no bells and no whistles just an overwhelming sense of peace. I was filled with a feeling of tranquility so pure and so profound it’s almost impossible to describe. In fact, words fail to convey it accurately. It was like floating without a single care in the world, yet it was more. There was a sense of concord, harmony, even friendship attached to it. I can only describe it as supernatural. One thing for sure, I’d never known anything even remotely like it before and certainly had no right to experience it under the present circumstances. While it only lasted a little under half an hour, it was enough, and from that moment onwards I knew not only that God existed, but more importantly, somehow, he cared. Since then, my life can really only be described as a journey where I have sought to know Him more deeply, more abidingly and more passionately.

People sometimes ask me how I can be so infantile as to believe in God. My answer is always the same. ‘How can I not!? If someone pulled you out of a wrecking machine and put you back together, wouldn’t you believe in them?’

I’ve given my testimony – or at least parts of it, and in various ways – many times. To the non believer who has led a particularly upright life, it generally falls on deaf ears. Their first impression, as they look down their nose at me, is that I probably should have spent time in prison (and they’re probably right). Their second is that my religion and associated spiritual experiences are only a placebo – a crazy invention of the human psyche to save a drowning man. Yet there are some, perhaps a little more forgiving, who can see how far I’ve come and they draw the conclusion that there must be something in what I believe. Then there are others who are up to their neck in trouble, and they can see real power and real hope in what they’ve heard.

If you are going to tell your story, make sure you keep it short, and accurately paint the portraits of before meeting Jesus and after.

## The discussion/s

Before we go any further, please be mindful of the cautionary warning on the side of the pack.

**WARNING: These discussions are only models and may self destruct at any moment. Argument, anger, false claims and change of direction should be anticipated at all times. Please wear the recommended protective equipment (Eph 6).**

The following is a series of partial conversations where I’ve tried to anticipate the listener’s responses to some extent. However, no conversation ever goes the way we want it to or even in the manner expected. The following are just possibilities and ideas. At the end of the day, you have to think for yourself.

## The resurrection

Having snared yourself a listener, this is a great place to start because it cuts straight to the chase.

Your friend might answer your initial request by asking, ‘Yeah, OK, tell me. Why do you believe in Jesus?’

‘Because he rose from the dead.’

‘Rubbish. Gee you’re gullible.’

‘No, I’m not. The resurrection of Christ is one of the most readily authenticated events of the ancient world. Lemme show you...’ Now you unwind with your resurrection speech.

It is a great way to start. However, it’s not without pitfalls. The major problem is that it puts the punch-line first. Ever tried telling a joke backwards? I can only imagine the teller would get horribly tangled in it. The same thing can happen here. The story of salvation is told in Scripture in roughly chronological order and we know it in that order. To change it and start near the end takes a quick mind to work backwards through the crucifixion, Jesus’ ministry, the promises of God, the establishment of Israel, the fall of man, etc. This is probably one for the more seasoned campaigner.

## The thumbnail sketch

You may prefer to proceed with the following slogan (already suggested numerous times) and say, ‘The Bible can be broken down into 3 basic statements’ –

### **God creates – man corrupts – God pays the price.**

**God creates.** ‘The Bible states that there is one God who created all things. That makes him the boss. But he also created man, and created him different than everything else. In fact, He created us to be in a perfect relationship with Him.

**Man destroys.** Instead of thanking him for life and every great thing on this earth, and loving him as we ought, we basically tell him to get lost. As a result, we do everything our own way and make a mess of it. This is disastrous on two levels. Firstly, we never become anything like we were designed to be. And secondly, and most importantly, God promises to punish our rebellion/treason. This means separation from Him and from everything that could conceivably be regarded as good, forever.

**God pays the price.** ‘However, out of his love for us, he offers to pay the penalty himself. Jesus, God in the flesh, dies the death we deserve. He takes the punishment for our sin on himself – thereby setting us free from its consequences.

They may respond by saying, ‘OK...sounds like a nice fairy tale...pie in the sky when you die and all that jazz...So, yeah...alright...you’ve told me. That’s cool...each to his own...right? I respect you for that.’ At this point, he/she thinks it’s over and they’ve gotten out of it lightly. But you’ve only told them the bare bones of your beliefs. Remember, you asked them to hear **why** you believe. Thus far you’ve told them a foundational portion of **what** you believe. That’s fair enough. You haven’t conned or tricked them. I don’t know if it’s really possible to explain why you believe what you believe without first exploring the nuts and bolts of your faith. You should respond accordingly.

‘Hang on a sec, I’ve only told you **what** I believe. I asked you to let me tell you **why** I believe it.’ They’ll probably roll their eyes and drone, ‘Yeah, yeah, OK, let’s hear it.’ This is where you give them your reasons and the best prepared proof of the resurrection you can offer. It trumps everything. If Jesus rose from the dead, then everything else that humans believe is really the fairy tale. Furthermore, it’s imperative that they understand that the resurrection demands a verdict.

When you’re done you might like to add any one or all of the following –

‘Seriously Joe, it actually makes a lot of sense. Even evolutionists speak of evolution as if it has the capacity for decision making – they treat it like a god. And you know, it’s not that odd to be a person of faith. The atheist believes there is no god. That makes him a man of faith. Just like me – he stands on his beliefs. Besides, the biblical story offers real answers to difficult questions – like, ‘Where did matter come from?’ Scientists can’t answer that. Or, ‘Why are we so different to the rest of the animal kingdom?’ Evolutionists have no satisfactory explanation other than to offer a variety of possibilities that they argue over. The Bible tells us that we are made in the image of God (intelligent, moral, creative, relational). This makes sense. There is no animal like us. The Bible also explains our propensity for mistakes. It explains why women suffer in childbirth when practically every other creature brings their young into the world relatively easily. It explains our sense of justice. It offers a better explanation for the existence of LOVE than anything else.’

But the bottom line, the Ace in the pack, is always the resurrection. And further, not only did Jesus rise from the dead, the Old Testament actually foretold it (Jonah, Isaiah 53:11, Psalm 16:9-10).

Now it’s time for you to apply the blowtorch a little and ask, ‘Ok that’s pretty much it. Thanks for listening, Joe. I just have one question for you.’

‘Yeah, what’s that?’

‘How about you? Would you consider Jesus?’

‘No. I’m really not religious.’

‘That’s OK, neither was Jesus. He just wants people to recognize who he is and to stop treating him like the enemy.’

‘What do you mean he’s not religious? He’s the founder of a religion, isn’t he?’

‘In one sense, yes. However, Jesus hated the falsehood and hypocrisy of the religious leaders of his time. Rather than all the ceremonies and rituals and hoops and hurdles that religion expects people to negotiate, Jesus said, Come to me all who are burdened and weighed down and I will give you rest, and also, that a genuine encounter with God was a matter of worshipping in spirit and in truth. Seriously Joe, what **good** reason do you have to **not** believe in Jesus?’

It’s a great question to ask because many people have absolutely no idea why they don’t believe in Jesus. Here’s a classic example. Only a few weeks ago a mate was telling me how his father came into God’s kingdom. It went something like this.

His dad’s a builder and was working on some extensions to the house of an elderly and somewhat feisty Christian gentleman. One day, whilst working, the old man asked him this question –

‘You a Christian, boy?’

Caught a little off guard, my friend’s dad answered, ‘Er...ah...no, I’m not.’

Undeterred, the old man shot another quick-fire question at the hapless builder, and barked, ‘Why not?!’ as if there was something wrong with him. And he was dead right, wasn’t he? As people of faith we know all too well that there is something diabolically wrong when people don’t want to be reconciled to their maker. There is no reason why this shouldn’t be exploited. Asking ‘Why not?’ might just be the catalyst that begins the erosion of their unbelief.

It’s priceless, isn’t it? I love this guy. But the great thing is that it had the desired effect. It bore fruit. It caused my friend’s dad to seriously ask the question of himself, ‘Why don’t I believe?’ In doing so, he quickly discovered that he had no good answer and thus his journey to knowing Christ had begun.

However, there are some who do know, or at least, can offer some sort of reason for their unbelief. They will throw out all sorts of comments like, ‘Yeah but you can’t trust the Bible, it’s full of contradictions’ (not true – but it does contain a number of apparent contradictions), or, ‘It’s all different now. It’s changed – just like Chinese Whispers’ (which it hasn’t, and demonstrably so), or,

‘There’s so many religions around, why can’t we take the best of what they have to offer?’ or, ‘I can’t believe in a God who sends people to hell,’ or ‘there’s too much evil in the world.’ All these are just a smokescreen.

Sometimes they will have a personal complaint. ‘Yeah I asked God to save my mum from cancer and she died. He’s either a sadist, impotent or he just isn’t there!’ As heart rending as this sort of situation is, it is still a smokescreen. The real reason for unbelief in every situation – quite simply – is that they don’t want to believe. Paul reminds us in Romans 8 that the mind of sinful man – the sinful nature – is hostile to God (Romans 8:6-8). This is the core of unbelief. It is the nature of sin to do anything other than meet God face to face.

Knowing this – and having the intestinal fortitude to challenge them, you might like to ask, ‘OK Joe, hypothetically – suppose I could prove to you that none of the things you’ve mentioned are really barriers? In other words, if there were no impediments whatsoever, what **good** reason is left for you to reject Jesus?’

Their answer will almost certainly be, ‘I don’t have one...but that’s OK because you haven’t offered the proof of your hypothetical yet.’ Touché. At this point you will have to deal with their issue/s.

## Objections

**Contradictions** – ask them to show them to you and they won’t be able to. If they can, and you can’t answer them, write it down and tell them you’ll get back to them with an answer (remember the do’s and don’ts).

**Chinese whispers** – no serious historian believes in New Testament Chinese Whispers. There were so many copies of the New Testament made in so many different languages that all translate into English in pretty much the same way, nobody seriously doubts that we have what the NT authors wrote. The only question is whether or not they told the truth. Did they write the truth? There is such a wonderful unity of thought throughout the N.T., written by eyewitnesses, that it’s hard to imagine that they did anything other than write the truth.

**Holy wars** – lots of people argue that religion (in general) and Christianity (in particular) have been the cause of most of the war that’s been waged over the centuries. Not true! Some wars have been errantly fought for and in the name of Christ (Crusades, Hussite wars, etc.) That is certainly true. However, the vast majority of bloodshed throughout the ages has been waged over nationalism, land, resources and ego. While it’s certainly true that throughout history some leaders have appealed to whatever deity/ies they worship to aid them in their endeavour, the war itself has not actually been waged for the benefit of said deity/ies, but for the leaders themselves supposedly on behalf of their people and for their common good – which is mostly a lie anyway.

**Other religions** – this is where the real contradictions arise. All supposed ‘holy books’ contradict the Bible. They’re either all wrong or only one of them is right. The Bible is the most likely candidate – again we return to the power of the resurrection.

**The God who sends people to hell** – we’ll look at this and ‘sin’ later in the chapter.

**The level of evil** – most of the evil that people have in mind here is that which is done by other human beings. This needs to be pointed out – ie, God cannot be held responsible for the destructive attitudes of people. They may counter by pointing to disease and natural disasters. This is a fair complaint. However, The Bible never avoids these events and God never promises to fix them in the here and now. He can hardly be blamed for in-action over an issue he never promised to fix.

**The personal tragedy** – this is hard and requires much sensitivity. There’s no easy way to answer this objection. One must first acknowledge the grief and empathize with them. Then it’s a matter of getting them to understand that there are plenty of faithful people who have served God all their lives and suffered the same fate as their mum. God doesn’t have to heal anyone. He also didn’t

have to allow us to develop medicine, but he did, and through it some are saved and given more years. Besides, one must ask, 'Is being angry at God for not doing something he didn't have to do and never promised to do sufficient grounds for rejecting the greatest gift a man or woman can ever possess?'

**Gay marriage** – The first thing to remember is that we must love our neighbor. We must love the homosexual just as much as anyone else. Sensitivity is key because many people now accept homosexuality as nothing more unusual than left handedness or red hair. Bearing this in mind, try offering this logic to your listener –

'Let's say, just for a moment, that there is no God and everything exists entirely by the process of evolution. If so, then wouldn't that mean that evolution has given us two sexes for a reason? Wouldn't it mean that heterosexuality is the direct and most desired result of natural selection?' This is a helpful way to proceed because it short-circuits the claim that we are homophobic, religious lunatics – ie, we're not just saying, 'because God said so'. This is a way of playing on their home ground, which they won't expect.

Now ask them what percentage of the population in any Western culture they think is homosexual. Invariably, they will probably answer by saying, 'Around 5-10%.' The magic number the gay community has attempted to cultivate in the minds of the general public since the 80's is 10%, which kind of sneaks into the region of normalcy. It may surprise you to know that the true number, almost universally, is somewhere between 1-2%. This means that the level of homosexuality is well outside the region of normalcy. In fact, it can only be described as abnormal. Whether it's a matter of nature or nurture is actually irrelevant when it comes to the gay marriage debate.

Why then should such a small minority have such a big say over something that has been exclusively heterosexual universally across all cultures for thousands of years. Gays will live together. Our culture has accepted and even embraced it. Our government has given de-facto gay couples all the same rights as their heterosexual counterparts. If they want to pledge themselves to each other, then let them have a 'civil union' and give it a name of some sort. But you can't call it marriage. Marriage is defined and has always been as the lifelong union between a man and a woman. While this may seem to be just a game of semantics, it most certainly is not. The typical heterosexual union produces children (whether you believe in God or whether you're an atheist who believes in every nuance of evolution) – the typical homosexual union does not and cannot produce anything. There is a massive difference. It is not a marriage!

Explained in this way, your listener may or may not agree with you, but he/she will at least see that you're sympathetic, logical and rational.

The homosexual/salvation question is a different issue altogether. This requires even more sensitivity. As noted, we are instructed to love others. Once again, whether homosexuality is a matter of nature or nurture is irrelevant. What we are, either by genetics or conditioning, is not the issue. Rather, it's a matter of what we do. There's nothing wrong with being homosexual – it's a matter of what you do with it. Scripture is clear – God says, 'No!' to the practice of it.

I'm an alcoholic. When I drank – to me – it was like breathing. I drank daily for a decade, sometimes for breakfast. I'm an alcoholic, and will die an alcoholic, but I don't practice it. Whether by nature or nurture is irrelevant – God says 'No!' to drunkenness. I don't see that there's any difference.

You may have to work hard with some of these objections – you may have to explain things twice using different words. Once the issue is adequately dealt with then ask, 'Could it be that you just don't want to believe?'

At this point the discussion could go particularly pear-shaped and end abruptly with your subject giving you an earful of expletives. That's OK, you'll get over it. You can't do any better than this. You've held a discussion. You've explained the gospel simply and offered proof of its truth, and you've lobbed the ball into their court. Like I've already said several times, they're now in God's hands. You've done what he asked you to do. It's not your job to drag them kicking and screaming into God's kingdom. That's up to him.

However, if they seem to begrudgingly capitulate (even if only a bit), admit the possibility that you are right and that their reluctance to accept Christ has no real substance, you could move to the gold platter question and ask them if they'd like to get right with God – 'Right here, right now.'

Alternatively, if they continue to throw up objections, you might like to try this little gem (which I think finds its origins with C.S. Lewis) and say to them, 'If I'm wrong about the message of the Bible and you're right in that it's all just a delusion, then I will live my life – a very fulfilled and happy one at that – and I will die never knowing. However, if I'm right and you're wrong, you're in big trouble mister!'

I used this on a guy once and it stopped him in his tracks. This may just be the trigger for a whole new discussion.

## What if?

Of course, your friend may insist on interjecting right from the beginning. The opening statement – **God creates** – raises serious objections with some people. That's good. It means that they're prepared to actually enter into the discussion. If this happens, you can now cast everything from a 'What if' perspective.

'**What if** there really is a God? Let's suppose for a moment that God really is out there, OK? I know you say there is no God, but let's just play the game for a few moments. **What if** he really is all powerful and created all things, including us? Wouldn't that logically mean that he is boss? If you were God and had created everything, wouldn't you see yourself as the one in charge?'

The obvious and only answer is, 'Yes.'

'**What if** we ignored him and did everything on our own?' Doesn't sound so bad until you ask the next question. '**What if** ignoring God amounted to committing high treason against the crown?' (I actually prefer the term 'TREASON' rather than rebellion or autonomy, because it is a word that yells 'CRIME.' We are criminals and we need to know it.) This is the very heart of sin. 'Once again, if you were in charge, if you were the sovereign Lord, wouldn't you possess absolute rights to justly stamp out any rebellion?'

Once again, the only logical answer is, 'Yes.'

'Then why is it that God isn't allowed to do that?'

'Wadda you mean?'

'Simply this – human beings are indignant over God's decree to punish sin – as if he has no right. And I need to add at this point that treason against God carries the death penalty which should come as no surprise when you consider that just about every culture throughout history has reserved the death penalty for those who commit treason against the crown... Lemme ask you another question.

**What if** God declared an amnesty and was prepared to fully pardon all those who admitted and accepted their crime and gave him back his crown? Would you do it?'

'Probably not.'

Once again we return to the topic of various barriers which can be readily answered (see above).

### **If you were to die tonight...?**

The two EE (Evangelism Explosion) questions are a great way to get someone's attention. Once you've finished explaining why you believe what you believe, and it's time to challenge your friend, you might like to ask these two questions –

- 1) If you were to die tonight do you think you would go to heaven?
- 2) On what grounds would God let you in?

Invariably, the answers to these questions go something like this –

- 1) 'I'd like to think so' or 'I hope so.'
- 2) 'Because I'm a good guy, generous, charitable, honest, hardworking, etc.'

Almost always the answer to the second question revolves around moral character. People don't wish to be labeled as sinners because their understanding of sin is woefully insufficient. They hear the word 'sin' and immediately think, 'moral failure.' And then comes the protest. 'But I'm not a bad person. I've done the best that I can. I know I'm not perfect, but I've done my best. Surely God can't expect any more than that, can he?'

And the answer to their question is, 'No, he doesn't expect more. He wants you the way you are, warts and all. He will change you – the bits he doesn't want – slowly over time, and it's relatively painless. But up front, just as you are.'

Your counter to their 2 answers could go something like this.

- 1) Wouldn't you like to be absolutely guaranteed of your eternal security?
- 2) What makes you think that a perfect God is going to allow any imperfection into his heaven?

These two responses will undoubtedly lead the discussion down any one of a number of different paths. Remember, be prepared! This is a great way to present the gospel because you don't have to explain the atonement at this stage. That can come later. At this point, there are 3 things that will probably arise.

- a) Sin. Sin is more a relational problem than it is a moral one
- b) Reconciliation. Christianity is more about reconciliation than it is morality.
- c) Hell. Divine judgement is more about us than it is God.

### **Sin**

Sin is a word that is thrown around like confetti, especially by the secular world. However, as briefly noted earlier, sin is more a relational problem than a moral one. This distinction is absolutely critical because the remedy for sin (and its consequences), is the same. It is relational rather than moral. In other words – you can never be morally upright enough to be right with God.

I usually explain sin as if it's a disease. The flu is as good an example as any to use because everyone's had it at some time and can relate to what you're saying. The actual virus is the root of the problem. It's what makes us sick. There are symptoms, like – runny nose, aching joints, itching,

cold sweats, headache, and so on, but they're not the problem. You can treat the symptoms to some extent with certain medications, but if the virus is still there, you are still sick until it is eradicated.

Sin is the same. The disease is treason against the crown. The symptoms are ignorance, greed, dishonesty, selfishness, violence, hatred, jealousy, and so on. You can exercise the human will to behave better and make some headway, but these are only symptoms. The disease (treason) needs to be healed – it needs to be dealt with. And it can only be dealt with by being reconciled to God. No amount of good will ever cover it. It's like treating the symptoms and ignoring the virus. You'll never get well. We can't actually be good enough for God, which leads us to –

## Reconciliation

Ask your friend this question. 'If you were planning a big celebration (pick something current in their life – let's say their daughter is getting married), your daughter's wedding reception, for example. Who are you going to invite?'

'Um...well...that's obvious, isn't it.'

'It should be, but why don't you tell me anyway.'

'OK. Friends, I guess...friends of ours and hers and her fiance's, family members, aunts, uncles, grandparents. You know, the usual crowd.'

'Yeah, that's right. But what can you say about all of those people? What do they all have in common?'

'Um...well...they're all people we know and love.'

'Exactly!' Then what makes you think God is any different?!

'Wadda you mean?'

'Just this. You aren't going to go around the neighbourhood with a questionnaire trying to find all the best people to invite to the reception. That's nuts. Nobody does that. You invite those you know. Heaven is like a wedding reception – in fact, Jesus actually uses it as an illustration – and God invites all those to the reception that he knows.' (Let that hang in the air for a moment, then ask), 'Do you know God?'

'Wadda you mean?'

'Do you know God? Do you love God?'

'No.'

Then it doesn't matter how good you are, you can't go to heaven.'

'Wadda you mean not good enough?' (Sometimes it takes a bit for the penny to drop.)

'It's not about what you do, Joe. It's about who you know. If you want to get to heaven, you have to be reconciled to God.'

At this point you can point out that our sin (already explained as the disease) separates us from God. We are on opposing sides because of our treason. We need to wave the white flag and accept Jesus who takes our sin on himself, and all its punishment. This is how he deals with our sin problem. He stands and then he dies in our place. God's justice is satisfied and we are granted an eternal pardon. But only – and this must be stressed – only if we make Jesus Lord. Then you can follow that up with an apologetic on the resurrection.

## Hell

There are 4 words used in the Bible that are generally translated as 'hell,' gehenna, hades, sheol and tartarus. Without going into the historical background and usage of these terms (such a thing is far too weighty for our purposes here), the unavoidable reality for all those who refuse God's offer of reconciliation is that they go to hell – both a state of existence and a place where God's love is

completely withdrawn. It's a topic that will come up. You, therefore, need to be completely prepared for it.

Your friend will probably respond to it in one of two ways. Full of bravado because God hasn't visited them face to face and because they haven't been struck down by lightning (ie, they live in a fantasy world with a false sense of security) he/she might just shrug it off by saying, 'Yeah, so what? It's no biggie. I can live with it. Besides, all my friends'll be there. It'll be a blast.' An attitude undoubtedly popularized by songs like 'Highway to Hell' and 'Hell ain't a bad place to be' (AC/DC). Most people live in their sin everyday and get along just fine without God. However, this is the perfect opportunity to say, 'You might be able to live with it, but you mustn't die with it.'

Alternatively, your friend might make a declaration like this. 'I simply cannot accept a God who wants to send good people to hell!' Either way, you now need to proceed with all the strength and clarity made available to you by the Spirit.

They must understand that God punishes sin. He has to, or he isn't God. In fact, if he didn't punish sin there would be no justice at all. God would be powerless – a toothless old man with a world spinning out of control. If God doesn't punish our sin, it means he doesn't care. It means he treats his creation in the same way as parents who offers no discipline to their children, allowing them to grow up like noxious weeds.

Ask your friend, 'What do you think hell is?' Let them speak until they run out of steam. Then say to them, 'This is what the Bible says about it.'

a) God is angry at our sin and that's totally just. He created us to know him and we completely ignore him. Why shouldn't he be angry? Wouldn't you? What makes matters worse is that we continue to ignore him even when he's prepared to grant us a pardon and welcome us back. I don't know about you, but I'd be furious.

b) God is not only angry – he is also, in a sense, powerless. He created us with an element of choice, which we've wrongly labeled, 'free will' (It's actually not free at all. Our sin has imprisoned us). Be that as it may, we are free to ignore him and play boss ourselves, if we so choose. God created us this way, otherwise we'd be robots. If we choose to ignore him right up to our death we also choose not to be reconciled to him as well. This leaves him no choice, but to let us go. It breaks his heart, but he cannot redeem those who refuse to know him.

c) This means hell – an existence where God's love is completely absent. The implications of this are profoundly disturbing, and they should be. They're supposed to jolt us into reality and promote a craving for reconciliation with our Maker.

Hell is an existence where every good thing is withdrawn. It has to be, because it is completely devoid of God's love and God is the source of all good. No more stunning sunrises, no more sumptuous food, no more joy, no more love, no more friendships. The biblical images of fiery damnation may well be just that – images. But the reality is that with every good thing gone, there is nothing left, only the individual. Eternal solitary confinement, which is unthinkable.

C.S. Lewis described hell the tail end of a trajectory, which I think captures the heart of the issue well. As our lives unfold without God we are ultimately headed for eternal condemnation if something doesn't change. We are on a trajectory to destruction. We are the king of our world – the master of our destiny. We rule our own kingdom – a kingdom of one where we are both Lord and subject. Hell is just that. God merely respects our wishes. We are given what we want. We have nailed our colours to the mast. We have said to God, 'I'm exercising my rights to self-government.' And God's reply? 'OK, I'm exercising my rights to let you have what you want.' And we end up stuck with ourselves, and only ourselves, for eternity. Man, what a nightmare! But we chose it

## The invite

If you are chronically ill, outrageously shy or have any sort of genuine difficulty explaining things to others, then you may find that all you're up to is inviting your friend to church. I'd rather they were invited to church rather than an event because it's at church where we really conduct our business. We fellowship with God on a community basis at church. Biblical teaching is the house special. Love and friendship are the entrée. Reconciliation with Jesus is the main dish and salvation is the desert. Make sure you ask them to come for at least a month and make sure you have a few friends at church prepared to welcome them warmly (without smothering them).

## Conclusion

I could have gone on writing for ages, but I think I've given you enough to make a start. As you do more and more of this, you'll develop ways of expressing things in your own manner. The important thing is that we make a start. The 'Parable of the Sower' makes that abundantly clear – 30, 60, 100 times clear.

To simplify everything, let's just recap, in point form, on the journey thus far.

- 1) The job belongs to every one of us. There is no other strategy.
- 2) Our mission field consists of those whom God has placed in our path (the people we know and any others we come to know).
- 3) It all begins with prayer. Unless God builds the house, the workers labour in vain.
- 4) Are we being salt and light? Are we being Christ to those around us? We are supposed to shine. In a world where God has been utterly sidelined and his church exists under a veil of suspicion, we need to be trustworthy. They might believe the message if they can trust the messenger.
- 5) Relationship is the key. Powerful human relationships are a gateway to a relationship with God.
- 6) Be mindful of the 'Do's and Don'ts'
- 7) Ask the question, 'Give me 10 minutes to tell you why I believe what I believe.'
- 8) Make sure you can give a good apologetic for the resurrection of Christ.
- 9) In finishing, I usually throw out the following challenge.  
Say to your friend –

'Human beings are very clever. We make all sorts of well informed decisions, and the practice commences pretty early in life. Even as primary school kids, most of us are making choices based on certain likes and dislikes. When we go to high school, the focus sharpens and we start to form a realistic idea of the sorts of vocations to which we are most suited. We make choices accordingly – well informed choices. Questions like, 'What subjects should I do that will set me on the right path for a profession in... whatever it may be? Which university will serve me best? What marks do I need in the HSC to get there, or should I do the IB (international bachelaurate) instead? Where should I buy my first car and how will I pay for it? Who should I go out with? Who should I marry? When should I plan a family? How many kids? Where should we buy our first home – location, location, location? How should I set up my retirement? What investments should I make? And so on, and so on and so on,' bubble readily to the surface. It's staggering just how good we are at doing this.

Yet it never ceases to amaze me that when it comes to the most important decision of all – ie, the one about where we will spend eternity – the practice of making well informed decisions is completely abandoned by most people. Why!? It's crazy! Eternity never ends!!! In comparison, this life is only a

small, measly handful of years. And yet, most people make no real decision about the afterlife. They just seem to ignore it as if it will go away. But it won't!!! Death is the greatest reality in life, and yet, the most people ever do is to take out funeral insurance and say, 'Well, at least, I've made the right preparations for my death.' Rubbish!!! Doesn't any of this strike you as odd?

All I want you to do is to do what you do with everything else and make a well informed decision about Jesus. Check him out. If it doesn't resonate for you, or you find that the evidence doesn't stack up, then so be it. But at least you can be satisfied that your decision about him will be on the basis of sifting the evidence and not just because our culture tells you he's not worth worrying about. If you won't at least investigate, I have to ask, what are you afraid of?

Then we hand them over to God. Your work is done (for the moment).

# Appendix: Apologetics

## Sound reasons to believe in Jesus

### Did Jesus really live?

One of the criticisms of the Christian faith that has arisen over the last several centuries is that Jesus of Nazareth, as presented in the New Testament, was only either a mythological figure based loosely on a real person who has undergone significant embellishment, or that he never existed at all – ie, that he was a complete fabrication who emerged at a time when the Jewish people needed a hero. In an essay entitled, ‘Why I am not a Christian,’ the 20<sup>th</sup> century philosopher, Bertrand Russell wrote – (p16)

#### Bertrand Russell

Historically, it is quite doubtful whether Christ existed at all,  
and if he did we know nothing about him.

Russell appeals to history. Therefore, we shall do likewise, and our aim is to discover whether or not the New Testament documents that speak of this enigmatic character can be trusted as real history. Russell says, ‘No!’ But Russell was a fool because all the evidence suggests otherwise.

The most significant data on Jesus is found in the first four books of the New Testament, the Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, John. Of these, there are two, Matthew and John, who claim to be actual eyewitnesses of the events. Mark was most likely the writer of the words of Peter, one of Jesus’ closest associates. Luke is identified as an outsider, a Greek physician who, in his own words, researched everything carefully. Most of the rest of the New Testament consists of a series of letters written by some of these same authors and a man named Saul/Paul, originally a vicious opponent of the faith who was converted in dramatic fashion during the formative years of the very ancient church.

These materials have supposedly been handed down to us through a process of copying and recopying. The first question to ask is, are Matthew, Mark, Luke and John the authoritative witnesses to Jesus of Nazareth?

You may have read Dan Brown’s ‘Da Vinci Code’ in which Professor Teabing (p 231) states that there are more than eighty gospels about Jesus. Actually this is completely false. There are only somewhere between 24 and 27, depending on how one defines a gospel. The majority of these, a total of perhaps 13, were discovered outside the Egyptian town of Nag Hammadi in 1945 (It’s hard to know the exact number because although there were some 55 documents discovered, only a quarter of them actually mention Jesus – some extensively, some hardly at all). They are commonly referred to as Gnostic Gospels because they reflect the beliefs and teachings of a second century religious system known as Gnosticism. Gnosticism, which finds its roots in Greek philosophical ideas which had been around for several centuries, taught that it’s only through special knowledge that one is saved from this corrupt world.

What can we say about these Gnostic Gospels? Although written in Coptic (ancient Egyptian) in the 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D. they are certainly translated copies of material originally written in Greek around the middle of the second century. But more importantly, do they speak the truth about Jesus? The greatest test of authenticity is to be found amongst the writings of the early Church Fathers, (Church leaders, writers and theologians from the late first century up to the early fourth century. In all of their writings

and correspondence they never quote from any other source than Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. The Gnostics never get a look in. The only time these other gospels are mentioned is when the Early Church Fathers (Irenaus in particular – late 2<sup>nd</sup> century) wish to refute them as false teaching about Jesus.

It seems that very early in the piece the Christian community had already accepted Matthew, Mark, Luke and John as the authoritative material on Jesus (probably well before the end of the first century) But what of the others? There are perhaps 10-13, again, depending on what we accept as an actual ‘gospel,’ that come from various parts of the middle east and eastern Europe. Some were used by the Church as ‘useful’ but never accepted as ‘Scripture’ because their authorship was not ‘Apostolic’ (ie, material written by the first generation of apostles – missionaries – who were eyewitnesses of Jesus’ ministry) Some are Gnostic, while others are ‘Docetic in character. Coming from the Greek – ‘dokeo’ which means to ‘seem.’ Docetism was a movement that stated that Jesus only ‘seemed’ to suffer and only ‘seemed’ to be human. Again, these were rejected by the ancient Church due to lack of apostolic authorship and their spurious doctrines.

It’s fairly readily accepted by most scholars that all the Gospels *other than* Matthew, Mark, Luke and John come from either the second century or later. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John however are accepted by most as having been written during the second half of the first century, ie, between 60 and 95 A.D. I would suggest, and there are others that hold this view, that they were all earlier than 70 A.D. because Jerusalem and its temple were destroyed in 70 A.D. by the Romans. To any Jew this was a most cataclysmic event, yet none of the gospels or any of the rest of the New Testament for that matter show no sign whatsoever that this event had taken place. At the end of the day, it appears that Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are the only acceptable and reputable source material about Jesus that we can trust as genuine.

But a further question still remains. ‘Can we trust the process of transmission?’ It’s a good question. Let me open that discussion by saying that much of the ancient history we teach in schools as fact has nothing like the quality of transmission as do the New Testament documents.

For example. (All dates are approx. unless otherwise specified)

Author/Work	Date Written	Earliest copies	Gap in years	No. of copies	Authenticity
Plato (Works of)	400 B.C.	900 A.D.	1300	7	?
Julius Caesar (Gallic Wars)	50 B.C.	900 A.D.	950	10	?
Tacitus (Annals)	100 A.D.	1100 A.D.	1000	20	?
Pliny Secundus (Nat. History)	100 A.D.	850 A.D.	750	7	?
New Testament	50-100 A.D.	Fragment (120 A.D.) Partial books (200 A.D.) Near Complete (250 A.D.) Complete books (325 A.D.)	50 100 150 225	5366	99+%

And that's not to mention all the manuscripts that were translated into other languages like Syrian, Arabic, Coptic, Latin and so on (around a dozen ancient languages). When these are added the number swells to well over 20,000 from the first 1000 years. Furthermore, one of the most astonishing things we can attest to is that –

from the writings and correspondence of the early Church Fathers of the first four centuries, there are enough quotes from the thousands of verses in the New Testament to reconstruct it all but 11 verses.

As you can see, the transmission of the New Testament is second to none. A fair question can be raised. 'If, with such a poor history of transmission, the works of Plato can be accepted and taught in universities and schools as an accurate portrayal of what he actually wrote then why can't the documents of the New Testament be afforded the same luxury?' For there are no other documents from the ancient world with this much textual attestation. It seems that the transmission can be trusted. In fact, no serious historian disputes that what we have today is what they wrote back then. The only question that remains is whether or not Matthew, Mark, Luke and John tell the truth?

Let's now turn our attention to sources outside the New Testament. There are three authors, roughly contemporary to the Gospel writers, for us to examine. Two Romans, Tacitus and Suetonius and a Jew named Josephus who, as far as we know, was never a follower of Jesus. This first quote from Tacitus is a series of comments he makes regarding the burning of Rome in 64 A.D.

### **Cornelius Tacitus (c. 55-120 A.D.)**

#### ***Annals (15.44)***

'...to suppress the rumour, he (Nero) falsely charged with the guilt, and punished with the most exquisite tortures, the persons commonly called **Christians**, who were hated for their enormities. Christus, **the founder** of the name, was **put to death by Pontius Pilate, procurator of Judea during the reign of Tiberius.**'

He tells how Christus (probably a Latin rendering) founded Christianity and was put to death by the Roman procurator, Pontius Pilate, at the time of Caesar Tiberius. This is exactly what the New Testament tells us. (Luke 3:1, Luke 23)

### **Suetonius (c. 50-60A.D.)**

#### ***Lives of the Caesars (26.2)***

'Punishment by Nero was inflicted on the **Christians**, a class of men given to a new and **mischievous superstition.**'

He refers to Christianity as a 'new and mischievous superstition' – probably because they refused to worship the gods of Rome or the emperor himself.

The next is Josephus, a Jewish historian who, in the second half of the first century, compiled a history of his people called the 'Jewish Antiquities.' Of Jesus he writes –

## **Josephus ben Mattathias (37-100 A.D.)**

### ***Jewish Antiquities (18.3.3)***

He (Jesus) drew over to him both many of the Jews and many of the Gentiles (non Jews). And when Pilate, at the suggestion of the principle men among us, had condemned him to the cross, those that loved him at first did not forsake him. And the tribe of Christians, so named from him, are not extinct at this day.

There is no good reason to suggest that Jesus didn't exist and furthermore, that he lived and died at the same time and under the same circumstances as the New Testament says he did. Yes Jesus really lived.

### **Did Jesus really work miracles?**

The New Testament is awash with examples and descriptions of Jesus as a miracle worker. Unlike our survey on his existence which is much broader than the handful of sources we looked at above (Pliny, Thallus, Phlegon, Mara ben Serapion and Lucian all speak of him) external evidence for his miracles is harder to come by.

Be that as it may, let's begin with the New Testament and explore the supposed eyewitness accounts. All four gospels record a broad spectrum of supernatural events we refer to as miracles – everything from exorcism to restoring sight, healing skin diseases, deformity and paralysis to walking on water and even controlling the weather. However, both Luke and John actually invite their readers to consider the claims with more than a passing glance, and furthermore, to regard them as far more than urban legend or mere myth. Luke's gospel begins –

#### **Luke 1:1-4**

Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses...therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you...so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.

Towards the end of his account of Jesus' ministry John writes –

#### **John 20:30-31**

Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples that are not mentioned in this book. But these are written so that you may know that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

Both these two writers, the first an investigator of the available eyewitnesses and the second an eyewitness himself, are insistent that they are telling the truth about the events they write about. Notice the weight they both place on eyewitness testimony. In other words, both documents are evidential in character and because they were originally written only a generation or so after the actual events

themselves, they beg the reader – in fact they are thinly veiled invitations – for the reader to investigate the facts which could easily be substantiated at the time. No one ever seems to have had a problem with the miraculous.

In fact, it's only really been in the last few hundred years, following the advent of the era known of as 'The Enlightenment' (coinciding roughly with the industrial revolution), that the miraculous had been questioned. This period has been the age of reason and scientific enquiry. For the modernist, scientific endeavour is the final arbiter of what can and can't happen. So-called miracles stand outside this realm and are thus generally treated in one of two ways – either as total fabrications, or as events that must have some other explanation outside the disciplines of physics, chemistry and biology.

But I ask the question – 'why?' If you told a scientist three hundred years ago that, in the future, he would be able to watch a drama on a box in his loungeroom, and moreover, that the pictures would arrive by floating through the air, he'd have said two things, 'You're a loony!' and, 'That's impossible!' Yet that's exactly what happened in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Just because you don't understand something doesn't mean it doesn't or can't happen. Just because a scientist can't understand or rationalise an event in the usual way doesn't mean it can't happen.

Although science has a good track record, it has, over the years made its fair share of blunders. Science cannot be allowed to be the final arbiter of all things. Furthermore, we must be cautious of dismissing the people of the ancient world as either, dull and stupid, superstitious or just plain childish in their beliefs regarding the miraculous. One need only read the works of the ancients to discover that this is simply not true.

The interesting thing is that in all the ancient writings we have, nobody ever comes forward to refute that Jesus could work miracles. On the contrary, Josephus, again an external source who has no vested interest in Jesus, has this to say about his ministry.

**Josephus ben Mattathias**  
***Jewish Antiquities (18.3.3)***

Now there was about this time Jesus, a wise man, if it be lawful to call him a man, for he was a doer of wonderful works, a teacher of such men as receive the truth with pleasure.

Josephus asks the question, 'Is it right to even call him a man?' because Jesus was a doer of what he refers to as 'wonderful works. If by 'wonderful works' he was merely saying that Jesus was just a doer of good, then he would undoubtedly have used the Jewish colloquial term, 'good deeds.' 'Wonderful works,' however, coupled with the question of whether or not Jesus could be called just a man, leads us to assume that Josephus understood Jesus as someone who was an exceptional individual who could do amazing things. And this is certainly the picture that the New Testament paints of him.

Again, I ask of the miraculous, 'why not?' If indeed there is a God, then surely he is all powerful, and thus, could he not over-rule where natural laws usually prevail and implement some other impetus we know nothing about to make something happen out of the ordinary?

We are surrounded by the miraculous all the time. 'Miracle' is a commonly used word. Doctors and medical workers will tell you that they've seen things they simply cannot explain – things that defy their medical knowledge – things they'll say couldn't have happened.

There were survivors, sixteen in total, from the 9/11 tragedy that shouldn't have survived. People who had been half way up inside tower 'B' who had tens of thousands of tons of rubble crashing down

around them and on top of them. You could put this down to statistical probability and say that it's possible – and that's true, it is possible, but really, is the probability any greater or less than Jesus saying to a cripple, 'Get up, take up your mat and walk,' and seeing it happen?

I had a friend some years ago whose wife was pregnant with their first child. Several months into the pregnancy, at a routine ultrasound, it was revealed that the baby had a clubbed foot. Further tests revealed the child to have a duplicate 21<sup>st</sup> chromosome. ie, a sure sign of Down's Syndrome. Doctors and medical staff pleaded with them to terminate the pregnancy because all the evidence told them that the child would be severely physically and mentally compromised. They refused to terminate saying that they would accept whatever God gave them. Thousands of people from hundreds of Churches throughout Sydney, across Australia and even other parts of the world prayed for the parents and the baby. Six months later their son was born with only a mild case of Palsy – no clubbed foot and no Down's syndrome. A miracle or just medical error in diagnosis? Interestingly, the doctors were utterly convinced of the diagnosis – convinced enough to plead with the parents to terminate.

Even today, many people consult horoscopes and fortune tellers and many of the shows on TV deal with the supernatural. It seems to me that this is more than simply a fascination with the miraculous. People are actually expecting the miraculous. Is it so hard then to believe that someone like Jesus, who claimed to be God in the flesh, could tap into the supernatural and perform the miraculous? Even more astonishing is that the miracles of Jesus were foretold over 700 years earlier by the Old Testament prophet Isaiah. He writes –

#### **Isaiah 35:4-6**

Be strong, do not fear, your God will come. He will come with vengeance – with divine retribution he will come to save you. Then the eyes of the blind will be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then the lame will leap like a deer and the mute tongue shout for joy.

Just a final note before we move on. One of the greatest authenticating marks of the New Testament is its lack of sensationalism. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John all record the miracles of Jesus, yet these events aren't recorded like flashing headlines. Rather, these writers simply state the events unambiguously and unceremoniously and then move on. They have the ring of truth about them.

### **Did Jesus Really Die?**

Many have come forward over the years and refuted the New Testament claim that Jesus died in the same manner or at the same time as Matthew, Mark Luke and John recorded. The reason behind the accusation is obvious. It's a way of refuting the claim that Jesus rose from the dead – an issue that we'll look at next.

Many Moslems believe Jesus never died at the hands of Roman soldiers during the time of Pontius Pilate. In fact the Qur'an (Koran) teaches it.

#### **Qur'an Surah (4:157)**

They slew him (Jesus) not nor crucified, but it appeared so unto them.

They suggest instead that Judas, Jesus' betrayer, was somehow switched for Jesus before the crucifixion. They believe that God would not have allowed one of his prophets (Jesus is afforded prophet status in the Qur'an) to suffer in this way and that he was either taken up to heaven before the crucifixion or that he went into hiding and appeared again later which gave rise to the resurrection stories. But surely this is ridiculous. At that particular point in proceedings Jesus was surrounded by and under the intense scrutiny of the Roman soldiers. To suggest that in the blink of an eye he simply disappeared and the soldiers mistook him for Judas is ludicrous. Besides which, Judas was already dead. He hanged himself in shame for what he'd done well before Jesus was nailed to the cross. (Matthew ch 27)

Furthermore, the writings of Mohammed, founder of Islam, are around six hundred years after the event while Matthew, Mark, Luke and John were all written within fifty years of it. Who are you most likely to believe?

Have you seen Mel Gibson's 'The Passion of the Christ?' A stunning and graphic portrayal of Jesus' final hours and brutal execution. At the time it was released there were some critics who believed the flogging scenes to have been over exaggerated. Personally, I agree. I think they were overdone, but not by much. The Jewish leaders were relentlessly demanding Jesus' execution. But the Roman Governor, Pontius Pilate, in whose hands Jesus' fate ultimately lay, could see no reason to grant such a request. This placed Pilate in something of a moral and political dilemma. What was he supposed to do? His job was to retain order in the region and he was under considerable pressure from Rome to do so.

In a desperate bid to satisfy the crowd's lust for Jesus' death, Pilate attempted to pass off the flogging as sufficient punishment – ie, to have Jesus flogged so savagely the Jewish leaders would relinquish their demand for execution. This was never going to be your average flogging and without limits or boundaries imposed by a supervisor who was at least semi-compassionate, a Roman scourging could quite easily be brutal enough to degenerate into a death sentence for any victim. Was it overdone in the movie? Yes, but not by much, and at the end of the day, probably not too far divorced from what actually took place.

The point is this – Jesus was already half dead when he was nailed to the cross anyway. Besides which the Romans, best described as cultured thugs, were expert killers – it's what they did, they were very good at it and they always got their man. To suggest even jokingly that Jesus could have survived is nothing short of laughable.

Did Jesus die in the manner and at the time the Gospels say he did? John's gospel tells us that a spear was thrust in his side and that a flow of red blood solids and water came out separately – a sure sign of death. Still not convinced? Then let us finish this section by looking again at an historical source that has no vested interest in the affair whatsoever.

### **Cornelius Tacitus (c. 55-120 A.D.)**

#### ***Annals (15.44)***

'...to suppress the rumour, he (Nero) falsely charged with the guilt, and punished with the most exquisite tortures, the persons commonly called **Christians**, who were hated for their enormities. **Christus, the founder of the name, was put to death by Pontius Pilate, procurator of Judea during the reign of Tiberius.**'

Did Jesus die at the Cross as described in the gospels? All the evidence says he did!

## Did Jesus Really Rise From the Dead?

This is the big question isn't it? In fact it's the question of the ages. Our experience of life is that when death comes, it's final. People are sometimes revived having been clinically dead for several minutes and sometimes even longer, but that's not really what we're talking about here. Jesus was dead for at least 36 hours, and already, decomposition of his organs was well under way. Indeed, our experience of death is that it's final. Dead men don't walk. Yet one of the biggest claims of the Bible is that after a day and a half (a period of time touching 3 consecutive days) sealed inside a tomb hewn out of solid rock Jesus rose from the dead and walked away as if nothing had ever happened. It's the most outrageous claim, but at the end of the day, it's the fundamental foundation upon which Christianity rests.

Let's begin this section by looking at something written 1000 years before Jesus was even born.

### Psalm 16:10

You will not abandon your Holy One to the grave, nor will you let him see decay.

1000 years before Jesus, the writer of the Psalm, King David, says that God's 'Holy One' will not be abandoned to the grave – will not remain in the grave and his body will not be allowed to rot. On Jesus' arrival 1000 years later he claims to be the one the Psalm is talking about and makes the same promise himself well before his death.

### Luke 9:22

'The Son of Man (himself) must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and the teachers of the law, and must be killed and on the third day, be raised to life.'

The resurrection was not just some random event that sprang out of nowhere or was cleverly hatched by Jesus followers after his death. It was promised 1000 years before Jesus and Jesus promised it himself. But the big question is, 'Is it true? Is the evidence strong enough?' Before looking at the evidence, let's just look at some of the objections that have been raised throughout the ages.

The first is the 'swoon' theory. ie, that Jesus didn't die, but only passed out and later revived. This is preposterous. As noted before, Jesus was beaten to within an inch of his life, crucified and then had a spear shoved into his side to make sure of it. Quite apart from the fact that no one could have survived what he endured and only 'passed out,' the swoon theory suggests that within 36 hours Jesus could have sufficiently recovered to move the stone (weighing several tonnes) from the opening to the tomb and walk off with a spring in his step and a rosy glow in his cheeks.

The second, and only marginally more plausible, is the suggestion that the disciples stole the body. At the end of the day though, this too proves quite ridiculous on a number of counts. Firstly, we are told that there was a detachment of soldiers – Roman guards – that had been deployed to guard the tomb with the express intention of safeguarding it so that the body couldn't be stolen. Secondly, Jesus' followers were all terrified that the same thing that had happened to him would happen to them. When Jesus was arrested some fled in fear while others followed at what seemed to be a safe distance. It seems crazy to suggest that they would attempt to overcome the Roman soldiers and steal the body just so they could say, 'See, we told you he'd rise from the dead,' don't you think? In any case, and most importantly, they had nothing to gain from doing this.

Objections aside, let's look at some of the evidence that actually corroborates the resurrection.

Firstly, we could talk about the first witnesses who were women. In the ancient world a woman's testimony simply wasn't accepted. Yet the gospel writers record women as the first witnesses of the risen Jesus. Because of their belief that Jesus' return was immanent, these writers saw their work as current for their own time. Why then, if they're speaking to their own culture, did they include the testimony of people – women – whose testimony would only be rejected? Why not just ignore the women altogether and record the male witnesses that appear a little later in the story? The answer is simple – because they were intent on recording the facts!

Secondly, what about these and other witnesses? If you were being asked to accept something like the resurrection of Jesus, how many witnesses would it take for you to believe? How many would it take? 10, 20, 30, 50, 100, how many would it take to convince you that the events of the resurrection are true? How many were there? Let's turn our attention to a passage from one of the letters in the New Testament written by a man named Paul.

### **1 Corinthians 15:3-8**

For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures, that he was raised on the third day according to the scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the twelve. After that, he appeared to more than 500 of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep (passed away). Then he appeared to James then to all the apostles and last of all he appeared to me also...

How many witnesses would it take to convince you that Jesus rose from the dead? Paul says there were more than 500 and, implicit in the text, is an invitation to put it to the test. Most of them, he says at that stage, were still alive. In other words, challenging his readers, 'If you want to know for sure and you don't trust me, or you find the whole thing just too bizarre, then go and find them. Interrogate them, ask them what they saw! Ask them what they witnessed.'

Nowhere in all the ancient documents, and there are many more besides the Bible, is there any hint that this challenge of Paul's was taken up and found to be false. On the contrary, during the remainder of the first century the Church continued to grow at an unprecedented rate, even under the threat of intense persecution. Unlikely to happen on the basis of a lie!

What about the female witnesses on the Sunday morning? At that time a woman's testimony wasn't allowed in court (ie, it had no credibility). But all 4 Gospel writers tell us that the first witnesses of the resurrection were women who then went and reported to the disciples. If the writers felt that their accounts would struggle to be believable they would simply have omitted the testimony of the women, but they didn't. Why? Because they were simply writing what happened.

The thing I always find most convincing of all is the change in Jesus' followers. If Jesus didn't rise from the dead, Christianity would never have taken off. It would have been dead in the water before it started. Let me explain. When Jesus was arrested, dragged off to an illegal trial and sentenced to death, his followers scattered, terrified the same things would happen to them. (Peter followed at a distance and later denied that he even knew Jesus. John was the only one who showed any backbone and can be seen at the foot of the cross next to Jesus' mother Mary, but the rest of them fled and went into hiding. Apparently John joined them in hiding later).

The Jewish religious leaders were prepared to move heaven and earth to be rid of Jesus. They wanted to stamp him out, and indeed, any memory of him from the minds of the people of Jerusalem. They

wanted to put him to rest and move on as if he'd never existed. As previously noted, his followers fled in legitimate fear of their own lives. And I say legitimate fear because the Bible also records in the book of Acts the lengths to which the religious leaders were prepared to go to silence Jesus' followers after his death (Acts ch's 4-9). If the story of Jesus' resurrection was only a fabrication, doesn't it seem rather odd that his followers would perpetuate such a lie when it would certainly bring them severe punishment and even the probability of death? Follow the logic.

**Nobody dies for a lie knowing it's a lie. Somebody might die for a lie thinking that it was the truth, and many have. But nobody dies for a lie knowing it's a lie, especially when they invented it themselves!**

Jesus' followers knew whether it was true or not. They were right at the coal face. If Jesus didn't rise from the dead, there should be no Church at all. His followers would have reflected perhaps on the great time they'd shared with him over their three years together and thought, 'Well yes it was nice Jesus while you were here, and you were a lovely fellow and everything, but now that you're gone, we're just going to get on with our lives.' The most realistic outcome of all is that they would have distanced themselves from Jesus and walked away utterly disappointed hoping that trouble didn't follow – hoping to simply blend into the background and get on with their lives.

But they didn't. Instead, they went out onto the street corners in the same city where Jesus was executed and preached about the risen Christ. They faced floggings, persecution, imprisonment and even death (the first Christian martyr was killed probably only three or four months after Jesus' death). **They had nothing to gain and everything to lose.** Let me just say that again. **They had nothing to gain and everything to lose.** Why take the risk of inventing a story that nobody wants just to perpetuate a religion that will only bring them trouble? For a lie? You've got to be kidding!!! Nobody does that! Yet every one of Jesus' chosen disciples (except Judas of course) not only doggedly continued preaching the risen Jesus, but were also quite prepared to give up their lives for it. Every one of them faced death because of their refusal to abandon the claim that Jesus had risen.

<b>Peter</b>	<b>crucified</b>
<b>Andrew</b>	<b>crucified</b>
<b>Philip</b>	<b>crucified</b>
<b>Simon</b>	<b>crucified</b>
<b>Bartholomew</b>	<b>crucified</b>
<b>James son of Alphaeus</b>	<b>crucified</b>
<b>James son of Zebedee</b>	<b>by the sword</b>
<b>Matthew</b>	<b>by the sword</b>
<b>Thomas</b>	<b>a spear thrust</b>
<b>Thaddaeus</b>	<b>shot with arrows</b>

Then of course there was John who, as one tradition has it, was boiled in oil by the Romans in an attempt to silence him over his outspokenness regarding the risen Christ. Miraculously he survived and, as far as we know, died of old age on the prison island of Patmos in the Aegean Sea. Surely, it is far more likely that if Jesus did not rise from the dead these men would simply have walked away and started their life anew. Instead, many boldly preached the risen Christ in the streets of Jerusalem. This is the foundation on which the Church began. I'll say it again, 'No one dies for a lie knowing it's a lie, especially when it's a lie they invented themselves!!!'

Josephus, the Jewish historian we met earlier, seems prepared to admit at least that these were the facts as he had learned them from others

**Josephus ben Mattathias**  
**Jewish Antiquities (18.3.3)**

...those who had loved him from the first did not forsake him,  
for he appeared to them alive on the third day...<sup>24</sup>

The evidence isn't irrefutable, but it is extremely strong. Like in any court room where evidence is put forward and considered, the jury is asked to make a finding ***beyond reasonable doubt***. You should put this to your friend. He is familiar with the principle. Implore them to consider the evidence and let 'reasonable doubt' be the yardstick by which it is measured.

Here's an interesting quote from Sir Norman Anderson dean of the faculty of Law at the University of London during the 50's and 60's last century, M.B.E, O.B.E, Queen's Council.

**Sir Norman Anderson**

**Jesus was unique. In all he said, in all he did, in all he was...he was in a class all by himself. Even apart from the resurrection, there are excellent and convincing reasons for believing he was God manifest in the flesh. Why then is it incredible that such a one rose from the dead? It would have been far more incredible if he had not.**

This is a man who has spent his life applying the principle of, 'beyond reasonable doubt' to everything he did in his professional life. His assessment, and the assessment of others of the legal profession, is that the evidence for the resurrection is strong enough to take to court and secure a victory beyond reasonable doubt.

If Jesus rose from the dead then you can't ignore him. If he rose from the dead then it makes him the great truth teller. It means that he told the truth about everything. It means that God punishes sin/rebellion/wrongdoing – it means that we are in need of a saviour to save us from that punishment – it means that Jesus is that saviour and that his death is full and sufficient payment for sin – it means that we must follow him and believe in him.

Now the real work begins, and there is no greater joy than to lead someone to Christ!!!

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<sup>24</sup> The earliest copies of this passage are damaged and difficult to read. As a result some commentators dispute the translation. However, they do so largely on the basis that Josephus wasn't a Christian. They ask, 'Why would he write something that supported Christianity when he himself was against it?' In answer, a) We don't actually know if Josephus was hostile to Christianity or not, and b) As an historian, he is probably simply compiling his material based on whatever evidence was at hand – ie, simply telling the story, not that he necessarily believed it, but that it was believed to be the case by many others.