



BEFORE YOU SHARE *your* FAITH

FIVE WAYS TO BE
EVANGELISM READY

MATT SMETHURST

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First published in Great Britain in 2022

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-913896-84-3

Designed and typeset by Pete Barnsley (CreativeHoot.com)

Printed in Denmark by Nørhaven

10Publishing, a division of 10ofthose.com

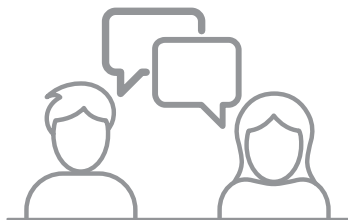
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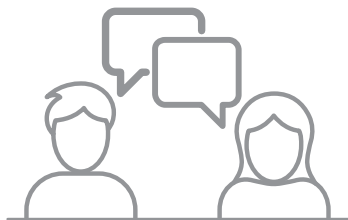
*To Dan Flynn, who was gospel-centered
before it was cool, and who showed a
young college kid that sharing Christ is
the most exhilarating privilege on earth.*



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INTRODUCTION:

NOT YOUR TYPICAL EVANGELISM BOOK

I have a love-hate relationship with evangelism books.

On the one hand, they have helped me immensely. It's surely no coincidence that in the seasons of life when I've been most deliberate about sharing Christ with others, a good book on the topic has invigorated me. And vice versa: in the sluggish seasons, it's usually the case that I haven't pondered the subject in a while.

I'm quite skilled, you see, at avoiding things that are good for me. Exercise. Kale. Books on

this topic. (Come to think of it, evangelism books can sometimes taste like kale.)

The main reason I'm tempted to avoid evangelism books, though, is because they reawaken something I'd rather keep suppressed: a low-level guilt, humming beneath the surface, that whispers: *You, Matt, are a lousy and inconsistent evangelist.*

And here I am writing a book on the topic! The gall! Except, I'm not. I'm actually doing something a bit different.

This is not a handbook of evangelistic jujitsu tips. I'll leave that to more able voices. This volume is about getting ready to open your mouth at all. It's about the preparation for the conversation.

In a previous book, *Before You Open Your Bible*,¹ I observed that how we approach things matters in a huge way. The world of sports is an obvious example—and a general analogy for life. Whether we're talking about a soccer player during warm-ups or a runner at the starting line, an athlete's simple approach can make all the difference.

Many evangelism books—including some excellent ones—start a little too downstream for me. I need help further up and further back,

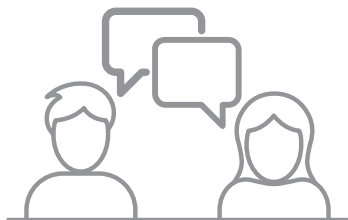
because I am so often stuck at the water's edge, unsure and immobilized, not quite ready to dive in.

Sometimes the problem is the inertia that comes with feeling out of practice—and the aforementioned guilt, or at least the lack of confidence, accompanying such a feeling. Other times it's simply the age-old presence of fear, or perhaps more accurately, the absence of love. My view of God can shrivel so much that it makes humans look inflated and intimidating.²

I don't know why you picked up this book, or if you did at all. (Perhaps someone shoved it into your unsuspecting hands.) But regardless of your reason for reading, here we are, exploring evangelism together. My hope is that the Holy Spirit would use these pages to ready your mind, and energize your heart, so that you joyfully and expectantly brag about the One who has changed your life.

Nothing is more worth talking about. And nothing is easier to stay silent about.

The remedy for this spiritual dilemma? I believe it may be hidden in what happens *before we share our faith*.



1

GRASP THE GOSPEL

Among the preludes to sharing your faith that I am commending to you, this one tops the list. Why? Because without it, there is no list. You cannot do evangelism if you do not grasp the *evangel*, the good news of Christianity.

Let's face it: the word "gospel" gets thrown around somewhat loosely in Christian conversations today—so much so that its weighty meaning can get lost, or at least muffled. To grasp the good news of the gospel, then, we must internalize the significance of that word "news." After all, this is what separates Christianity from every other religion. Christianity is not

fundamentally an ethical code, or good *advice*. It is, above all, an announcement of good *news*.

You don't need to go to seminary in order to grasp the gospel. You don't need to be in ministry to grasp the gospel. You don't even need to have been a Christian for five minutes in order to grasp the gospel well enough to convey it to others.

All you need to understand is that two thousand years ago, an invasion took place. Heaven came to earth in the person of Jesus, and he inaugurated a whole new kingdom.³ For thirty-three years, he lived a life of unflinching, perfect faithfulness to God the Father. In other words, he lived the life that, try as we might, we cannot live. And because he loves us, he died the death that we deserved to die. As a believer in Jesus, I can know that on the cross he was treated as if he had lived my sinful life, so that I might be treated as if I have lived his righteous life.

And then Jesus was buried. Until he wasn't—because three days later, he got up and walked out of his tomb. Now everyone who turns from their rebellion—whether of the plainly wicked or subtly “religious” variety—and trusts in Jesus is united to him in this life and the next. Believers will one day be resurrected in new bodies fit for

a new, resurrected earth. We will enter into the joy of our triune Lord—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—and will rule under him as kings and queens of the universe, forever.

In a skeptical age, this may all sound far-fetched, like a fairy tale for gullible kids. *Too good to be true*. But this news is entirely true. It just isn't deserved—indeed, it isn't fair. As one song phrases it, “Why should I gain from his reward? I cannot give an answer.”⁴

But mercy is never fair. That's why it's called mercy.

ONE GOSPEL, TWO ANGLES

I live in Richmond, Virginia, and there are things about my city—size, layout, population density, and so on—that I can best learn from the vantage point of an airplane. There are plenty of other things, though, that I can better learn by walking down Broad Street. Both perspectives are helpful, even necessary, for understanding Richmond. A street-level view without an aerial perspective to frame it, or an aerial view without a street-level perspective to fill it out, will inevitably yield a truncated frame of reference. Sure, we are just talking geography—Richmond's history and

culture, for example, must be learned by other means—but a failure to see the city from various angles creates a one-dimensional, distorted outlook. Not to mention an impoverished appreciation for the area in all its fullness.

Likewise, the gospel can be profitably observed from two biblical vantage points: “in the air” and “on the ground.”⁵ Just as there are not two capital cities in Virginia, so there are not two gospels. There is one, which we can marvel at from two angles.

The gospel “in the air” is the sweeping story, from Genesis to Revelation, that can be summarized in a few plot points (for example, creation, fall, redemption, and new creation). The gospel “on the ground,” meanwhile, fleshes out how this epic narrative becomes good news for sinners like us (for example, by looking at God, humanity, Christ, and our response).

At the outset of this chapter, I offered a brief summary of the gospel story. But we can fill it out even more. Perhaps one way to synthesize the *best* of these complementary perspectives—both “in the air” and “on the ground,” both “wide lens” and “zoom lens”—is to consider the gospel story in four movements: the Ruler, the

Revolt, the Rescue, and the Response. I hope that this deeper dive will provide a rich context from which to share your faith.

THE RULER

“In the beginning, God . . .” (Gen. 1:1). The Bible opens with history’s most basic statement about reality.

God created, sustains, and rules everything that exists. Contrary to cultural misconceptions, he is not Santa in the sky, nor a cosmic vending machine, nor an irritable drill sergeant, nor a deadbeat dad. He is the King of glory and the Lord of love. In fact, he is an eternal community of persons, a *Father* loving his *Son* in the joy of the *Holy Spirit*. And because this loving and joyful God is Trinity—one God forever existing in three persons—love is at the heart of the universe.⁶

This triune God made humanity—you and me—in his image to know and enjoy his love. So we were made *by* God (which means he alone owns us) and *for* God (which means he alone satisfies us). Human beings were custom-designed to find meaning and fulfillment and life in our Creator above all else—above success,

above popularity, above recreation, above romance, above *self*.

Now, is that the story of your life—being totally satisfied in your Maker and treasuring him above everything? It certainly isn't the story of mine.

What happened?

THE REVOLT

We look for love in all the wrong places, because something has gone terribly wrong in our hearts. This echoes what happened when our first parents, Adam and Eve, turned their backs on God and chose to call the shots themselves,

***THE TENTACLES OF SIN HAVE
DEFORMED OUR HEARTS AND
DISORDERED OUR LOVES.***

fracturing his creation and plunging his image-bearers into an ocean of sin. Instead of living for our Maker, we live for ourselves. The tentacles of sin have deformed our hearts and disordered our loves. Every one of us has rebelled, by both nature and choice, against the Lord of love.

It's easy to think of sin as a relatively minor thing—outward naughtiness perhaps, or a kind of