

Peter, Paul and Engel - Evangelism as a process not an event

Introduction

Jesus' last command to his disciples was to 'go and make disciples of all nations, baptising 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.' (Matt 28:19)

Only the 'make disciples' is imperative, 'go', baptising', 'teaching' are all descriptive. Making disciples is the only measure of success in evangelism and discipleship is measured by commitment to and participation in the local church.

Evangelism is defined: 'The nature of evangelisation is the communication of the Good News. The purpose of evangelisation is to give individuals a valid opportunity to accept Jesus Christ. The goal of evangelisation is the persuading of men and women to accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour, and serve Him in the fellowship of His Church.' (Lausanne Congress on World Evangelisation, 1974).

Evangelism is a process not an event - the Engel scale

It is important to realise that people go through a process in coming to faith and must be approached differently depending on where they are. It has been estimated that the average person requires 4-5 significant encounters before becoming a disciple.

Successful evangelism relies on assessing where a person is and then helping them take the next step. The Engel scale shows 8 steps toward someone becoming a disciple and 3 steps afterwards and can be quite useful in conceptualising the evangelism process.

- 8 Awareness of a supreme being but no effective knowledge of gospel
- 7 Initial awareness of gospel
- 6 Awareness of the fundamentals of the gospel
- 5 Grasp of implications of the gospel
- 4 Positive attitude towards the gospel
- 3 Counting the cost
- 2 Decision to act
- 1 Repentance and faith in Christ

Regeneration

- +1 Post-decision evaluation
- +2 Incorporation into the body
- +3 A lifetime of growth in Christ - discipleship and service

When a person gets to -2 they may decide to not repent and believe in which case they go back to -5.

Consider the apostle Peter and his process up the scale during successive significant encounters with Jesus.

1. Peter was Jewish and had been brought up in the Jewish faith. He knew the history of the Jewish nation, the law and the prophets, all of which point (at least covertly) to Jesus. He, along with his fellows was expecting Messiah.

2. Chronologically, our first encounter with Peter is in John 1:36ff. John the Baptist points out Jesus as the Lamb of God to two of his disciples. One of them is Peter's brother, Andrew, who immediately went and found his brother and introduced him to Jesus (v42). At this point, Peter (Simon) had little or no effective knowledge of the gospel although, as a Jew, he believed in God. He was at -8 and this encounter gave him an initial awareness of the gospel in that he was introduced to the idea that Jesus might be the Messiah and the possibility of change (v42).
3. Later, in Luke 4:31-39 Jesus goes to the Synagogue in Capernaum where people are amazed by the authority of his teaching and his power over demons. The fact that he goes from the synagogue immediately to Peter's house indicates that Peter was probably present at that meeting in the Synagogue. At Peter's house, Jesus raises Peter's mother-in-law from a fever. Perhaps Peter, having had the idea that Jesus was the Messiah planted in him by Andrew and having seen Jesus at work in the Synagogue brought Jesus home because his mother-in-law was ill. In any case, these demonstrations of Jesus' authority and power, kindness and compassion underlined the growing perception in Peter as to who Jesus was.
4. On another occasion, in Luke 5:1-3 Jesus borrows Peter's boat to speak from and almost certainly spoke on the theme 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near' as that was the thrust of his message at this time (Matt 4:17). This exposition of the gospel (good news and expected action) moved Peter up to -6.
5. Immediately after this (Luke 5:4-10) Jesus revealed something of who he was to Peter through the gift of a word of knowledge (v4). This revelation of Jesus had a profound effect on Peter causing him to see his own sinfulness and separation from God (v8) and causing him to acknowledge Jesus as Lord. In other words, he understood the implications of the gospel and moved to -5 or -4.
6. Matthew amplifies this part of the story (Matt 4:18-20, Luke 5:11). Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee and came upon Peter and Andrew. He instructed them to follow him which they immediately did moving Peter to -2 or -1. Peter's acknowledgement of his own sinfulness and Jesus' lordship together with his obedience constitutes complete repentance.
7. The final revelation of Jesus given to Peter by the Father (Matt 16:16 and John 6:68,69) leaves Peter at -1. The seed planted by Andrew had borne fruit.

Peter was 'born again' (Jn 3:5) when he received the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost and was also incorporated into the body of Christ (Acts 2:42) and into lifelong discipleship and service. A lot of the groundwork was done earlier in Jesus' call to apostleship (Luke 6:12-14) and commissioning of Peter (Jn 21:15ff) - a story full of resonances for Peter (the catch of fish in vv 6,7 and his threefold confession in front of the fire in vv15ff.)

It is also interesting to consider Paul's story against this model. It is tempting to think that Paul's Damascus Road experience took him from -8 to -1 in one go. It wasn't like this.

1. Paul was trained as a Jewish theologian and teacher. As such, he believed in God and had a very wide grasp of the teachings of the Old Testament which contains all the basics of the gospel, although Paul would not have understood this at the time. As a Pharisee, he also believed in the resurrection. Having been in Jerusalem during part of the rapid growth of the church he was almost certainly aware of some of the fundamentals of the gospel. (He may well have been present during Stephen's defence (Acts 7:1-53). When we first meet him in Acts 7, Paul is at -7 or -6.
2. We first meet Paul as the person looking after the clothes of the people stoning Stephen (Acts 7:58) and he witnessed Stephen's Christ-like death (Acts 7:56,59; 1 John 3:2). Paul gave approval to Stephen's murder (Acts 8:1) but cannot have failed to have been impressed by the manner of Stephen's death. In any case, it left him in no doubt about the implications of the gospel (-5) and he had received forgiveness from Stephen's lips.
3. However, his attitude to the gospel was far from positive! (Acts 8:3, 9:1) This is often the case with someone in whom God is working when they don't want it!
4. It was at this point that Jesus stepped in and confronted Paul by direct revelation on the Damascus Road. He stopped Paul in his tracks (literally) and forced him to take time to reflect. Ananias found him a very different person 3 days later; his attitude was completely different (-4).

5. In Acts 9:16 God reveals to Ananias that he is showing Paul both the job God had for him and what he would have to suffer as a result. Paul has to count the cost of following Jesus (-3).
6. Ananias' prayer and words to Saul help him through to new life (0)
7. Following this, Saul went and joined the disciples at Damascus and eventually in Jerusalem (+2).

An obvious point is that the most effective evangelistic in terms of making disciples will be with people who are already higher up the scale, people in whom God is already working.

It is interesting to note that when Paul, who was apostle to the *Gentiles* (Gal 1:16), started work in a new town he usually went first to the *Jewish* synagogue (eg Acts 13:5,14, 14:1, 17:2, etc) or to a place where Jews might meet to pray (Acts 16:13). I think he was looking for 'God fearers', gentiles who God was drawing to himself (Acts 10:1-2, 13:16, 26), gentiles who were higher up the scale than their pagan neighbours. Even though a particular evangelistic activity is aimed at a particular level, we should always be asking God to point out or lead us to people in whom he is working already (Jn 5:17,19), people who are higher up the scale.

Also, it should be noted that the Lausanne convention talks about a *valid* opportunity to accept Jesus. Sometimes we think we have given people an opportunity to accept Jesus by, for example, getting them to repeat the "sinner's prayer". If, however, they are at point well down the scale, this prayer may in fact only serve to move them up one step and will not constitute a profession of faith because there will be no repentance.

There is also great danger in getting people to "pray the prayer" when they are not ready. Someone who "accepts Christ" when they are really a long way down the scale won't experience real conversion - they have not really become a Christian, only moved one step nearer. In this position they are very likely to fall away. They are then very difficult to reach with the gospel because "they have tried it and it doesn't work". I think this is what Jesus was talking about in the parable of the sower when the seed fell on stony ground. For such people we need to have patience and, under the direction of the Holy Spirit, 'remove the stones' so that the seed can properly sprout and come to fruition. If we harvest too early we spoil the crop!

The work of the Holy Spirit

It is vital to remember that it is only God through the Spirit who draws people to himself and only God who can bring people to new life, **we can do neither** (Jn6:44, Jn1:13). God, in his infinite mercy, allows us to be involved but we cannot persuade people into the kingdom. It is by God's direct revelation (Matt 16:6) and the work of the Spirit, maybe through us, that anything happens not by our argument (1 Cor 2:1-5).

The Spirit is in the world convicting people of sin, righteousness and coming judgement (Jn 16:8-10) and it is this convicting work that brings people up short and causes them to repent - turn from their former life and accept forgiveness and new life.

It is interesting to see how this works in some of the examples given in the Bible.

1. King David was brought to repentance of his sin against Uriah and with Bathsheba through a direct message through Nathan the prophet. The Holy Spirit revealed God's *knowledge* of David's sin through a parable and its application by Nathan. (2 Sam 12:1-7)
2. The prophet Isaiah had a vision of God's *glory* (Is 6:1-4) which convicted him of his sin (v5).
3. Peter was convicted through Jesus' display of God's knowledge about the fish (Lk 5:4)
4. Zacchaeus was also convicted because of Jesus' knowledge of him - Jesus *called him by name* (Lk 19:5,8)
5. The prostitute who washed Jesus' feet with her tears and anointed him with perfume at the house of Simon the Pharisee was brought to repentance by Jesus' *acceptance, forgiveness and love*. (Lk 7:36-48)
6. The thief on the cross was convicted through Jesus' *unjust suffering* (Lk 23:41,42).

7. Paul was stopped in his tracks by the revelation of Jesus as the *lord he was persecuting*

It seems that conviction and repentance comes whenever God is revealed as who he is in some way; whenever a person really understands in his heart some aspect of the character of God and the existence of God impinges on the reality of their lives. Interestingly, there is no example of someone being affected this way by a demonstration of God's power alone (in healing or a miracle) - but only if such a demonstration accompanies the preaching of the gospel.

A free gift

Finally, people have to come to realise that forgiveness and a new life (salvation) is a free gift (Eph 2:8) and this implies that people must humble themselves to come to God, giving up all attempts to earn anything from God. (Eph 2:9) There will be no-one in heaven who will be able to say, 'I did it my way'.

Personal Evangelism

Most of us get opportunities to witness to friends and neighbours but the number of not-yet-Christians we know diminishes rapidly as we settle into the church - we no longer have common interests and we spend more and more time with Christian friends. However, personal contact is extremely important as research shows that over 80% of people who become Christians do so through personal contact not through events or crusades. Our witness as individuals is a powerful way for God to create interest in those with no knowledge of the gospel (-8). This means two things:

1. We need to make time and opportunity to get to know people outside the church
2. We need to make best use of the contacts of new Christians. (this should be particularly profitable since, hopefully, they will have noticed a change)

In his grace, God uses us to plant seeds in peoples' lives through our personal witness. We need to recognise that they then embark on a process which may take a long time. We (or someone else) may have planted a seed (like Andrew in John 1:41 or like Paul in 1 Cor 3:6) but the 'seed' needs to be watered (1 Cor 3:6) even though it is God that makes it grow - we are part of the process.

This process of 'watering' consists of

1. Praying for and actively looking for opportunities to show Jesus' compassion and kindness through an act of kindness (service) to the person
2. Praying for and actively looking for opportunities to show Jesus' care and presence through a word of testimony
3. Praying for and actively looking for opportunities to show Jesus' power through praying with the person
4. Praying for and actively looking for opportunities to share the gospel message

In addition we should be praying for the Holy Spirit to reveal Jesus to them and to convict them of sin, righteousness and judgement (John 16:8-10). It is the revelation of Jesus that will bring repentance.

Each of these activities, under the direction of the Holy Spirit, serves to reveal something of the character of Jesus. In other words, God can use these encounters to reveal himself to people. Remember that it is revelation that leads to repentance.

At the right time God will call the person to follow him and they will choose to obey or reject the gospel.

Peter's story revisited

Looking at Peter's story again, you can see these same elements:

- *John 1:35-42* John exclaims, "Look! The Lamb of God" and Andrew goes to Peter and says, "We have found the Messiah" - **a word of testimony**
- *Luke 4:31-39* Jesus preaches in the synagogue "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near" (Matt 4:17) and demonstrates the kingdom by healing a man with an evil spirit. Jesus preached the "good news of the kingdom" (Matt 4:23) - **preaching of the gospel** Peter was there (they went straight from the synagogue to Peter's house) where Jesus healed Peter's mother-in-law - **a demonstration of power, an act of kindness**
- *Luke 5:1-3* Jesus preached from Peter's boat. No doubt this was the same message of the good news of the kingdom - **preaching of the gospel**
- *Luke 5:4-10* Jesus revealed himself through the miraculous catch of fish - **a revelation of Jesus**. Peter is convicted of his sinfulness and repents - **conviction by the Holy Spirit**
- *Luke 5:10-11, Mark 1:16-17* Jesus calls Peter to follow him and Peter leaves everything to follow - **obedience to the call of God**

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