



FaithLink

Connecting Faith and Life

Sharing Faith by Jill M. Johnson



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A recent report by the Barna Group revealed that almost half of all Christian millennials believe it's wrong to share their faith, even though they believe a relationship with Christ is important. What are the reasons for their conflicted feelings about evangelism? How can Christians adopt relevant ways of sharing the good news to a changing culture?

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Reluctant Evangelists

Evangelism is a word that many of us, particularly United Methodists, tend to avoid. It's a term that evokes experiences with judgmental zealots, single-topic ("get saved") preachers, and people who push their beliefs on others. It only makes sense, if you've had a negative experience with evangelism, that you probably avoid it. Millennials in particular are sensitive to the beliefs of people with other faiths and the potentially offensive nature of proselytizing.

Recently, I ran across a job description for a company seeking a "social media evangelist." I found it ironic that a culture that avoids this practice has now co-opted the word for other uses. Yet Paul's question in his letter to the Roman church two thousand years ago remains relevant: "And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?" (**Romans 10:14**, NIV). If I'm not afraid to tell you about the fabulous new restaurant I found last week, why would I be reticent to tell you of the One who changed my life?

A recent study by the Barna Group, a research company focused on the intersection of faith and culture, confirms the reluctance many of us have about sharing our spiritual experiences. In its report, "Reviving Evangelism," Barna explains that practicing Christian millennials are especially conflicted about evangelism, with almost half agreeing with the statement, "It is wrong to share one's personal beliefs with someone of a different faith in

hopes that they will one day share the same faith.” However, this same generation believes that being a witness about Jesus is important (96%) and they report feeling equipped to share their faith with other people (73%). In contrast, smaller percentages of older practicing Christians feel it’s wrong to share their faith (27% for Gen X and 19% and 20% for boomers and elders, respectively), but these older groups also report less confidence in being “gifted at sharing my faith” (66% for Gen X, 59% for boomers, and 56% for elders).

Barna defines millennials as those currently ages 20–34, Gen X as 35–53, boomers as 54–72, and elders as 73+.

REFLECT:

- How do you define “evangelism”? What does the term “sharing your faith” mean to you? In what ways are they similar or different?
- Share any negative or positive experiences you’ve had with evangelism.
- How would you respond to the statement, “I am gifted at sharing my faith with other people”?

Cultural Sensitivities

Christianity Today chose to headline its coverage of the Barna report with the statement, “Half of Millennial Christians Say It’s Wrong to Evangelize.” I have to wonder, though, if that headline is truly accurate. It could be instead that millennials have a different definition of evangelism and its goal. According to the report, 94% of millennials believe that “the best thing that could ever happen to someone is for them to come to know Jesus.”

Yet the world that millennials were born into is much bigger and more complex than that of their elders. Millennial Christians report an average of four close friends or family members who practice a different faith. By comparison, their boomer parents and grandparents have just one. Millennials’ faith in Christ is very important to them, but maintaining authentic relationships with a diverse group of friends is also important.

I’ve observed this dichotomy in my own millennial children. My kids and their friends don’t think it’s “wrong to share their faith,” but they prefer that these conversations happen naturally and under the right circumstances. In some ways, they are more reliant on the Holy Spirit to guide them toward the right opportunity. Also, unlike me, they didn’t grow up in an environment where discussing faith was focused on converting others to Christianity. *Christianity Today*’s headline could just as easily read, “Millennial Christians Can See the Beauty in Your Faith Tradition While Also Loving Jesus and His Teachings.”

REFLECT:

- What are your thoughts on the tension in believing that sharing your faith is wrong while also wanting others to know Jesus?
- Have you had an opportunity lately to share your faith? How did that conversation come about?

What Is the Good News?

Sensitivity to cultural differences doesn’t change the following:

1. Jesus commissioned us to “go and make disciples of all nations” (**Matthew 28:19**);
2. This world is desperate for hope and meaning; and
3. Sharing your experiences of God’s grace and Christ’s peace in your life can transform another person.

However, the reality is that old-school approaches to evangelism don’t work in today’s world. Both unchurched and lapsed Christians are seeking authenticity, not tracts and tent revivals. As pointed out at the Alpha USA Conference in January 2019, non-Christians don’t need to know that Christianity is right or true; they want to know that it’s good.

According to the Craig Springer, Alpha USA executive director, evangelism needs to undergo three shifts:

1. **From proclamation to conversation.** Jesus’ ministry was conversation-based. In

the Gospels, Jesus asked 370 questions, was asked 183 questions, but only directly answered three. Our culture is searching and longing for conversations without judgment, but we aren't engaging the questions being asked.

2. **From explanation to experience.** Language about a "God-shaped void" and detailed explanations of theology don't resonate well with today's non-Christians. They aren't necessarily searching for God, but they are searching for meaning and purpose. In this context, how can we share the reality and power of God's presence?
3. **From discord to unity.** The unchurched see our lack of unity, which is the biggest influence on their church involvement. The larger Christian church has an uphill battle to fight perceptions of being beholden to political power and hypocrisy.

The "Reviving Evangelism" report reminds us

that making disciples isn't the same thing as demographic dominance or survival; it's about sharing the good news of God's boundless love as expressed in Jesus. The report says, "Cultural decline and fragmentation cannot threaten the existence or integrity of the Church as a gospel community, but the failure to share our faith certainly can."

This final quotation by author David Augsburger was shared at the Alpha Conference and became a profound frame of reference for evangelism: "Being listened to is so close to being loved that the average person cannot tell the difference." Listening and loving are at times the easiest things in the world and at times the hardest. Our teacher, the Christ whom we seek to imitate, excelled at both.

REFLECT:

- What are your thoughts on needed shifts in evangelism?
- For you, what is the connection between listening and sharing your faith?

Core Bible Passages

The best examples of evangelism are the stories found in the Bible about those who encountered Jesus and were transformed as a result. After Jesus engages in a genuine conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well (**John 4:7-42**), she sees something powerful in him and is inspired to tell everyone, "Come and see a man who has told me everything I've done!" (**verse 29**). John tells us that many people believed because of her testimony (**verse 39**).

We find Paul's testimony in **Philippians 3:1-16**. Before his encounter with Jesus, Paul tells us that he was confident in his achievements and describes himself as a "Hebrew of the Hebrews" and blameless under the law (**verses 5-6**). Yet, after meeting Jesus on the road to Damascus, nothing could compare with the "superior value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord" (**verse 8**). His one goal became his "upward call in Christ Jesus" (**verse 14**).

In **John 9**, Jesus heals a man who was blind. The healed man testified about what Jesus had done and got himself into trouble with the Jewish leaders, but he never wavered, saying, "Here's what I do know: I was blind and now I see" (**verse 25**). He then encountered Jesus again and Jesus helped his faith take a step forward, asking him if he believed in the Human One (or Son of Man). The man responded, "Who is he, sir? I want to believe." Jesus replied, "He is the one speaking with you" (**verses 36-37**).

REFLECT:

- Consider where Christianity would be if the above people hadn't shared their stories. Discuss the importance of their faith, even thousands of years later.
- What is your story of coming to faith? Where do you see it reflected in Scripture?

Evangelism as Spiritual Formation

In order to share your story, you have to know your story. In my experience, many people who claim the moniker *Christian* have a hard time articulating why they are a follower of Jesus and how Jesus has changed their lives. It's easy to talk about beliefs and creeds, but it's much harder to speak of transformation and experience.

As part of the “Reviving Evangelism” report, Michelle Jones was interviewed for an article titled “Sharing Faith Forms Faith.” Jones is a pastor and writer, serving at Imago Dei Community Church in Portland, Oregon. She once viewed evangelism and spiritual formation as two separate processes but now understands that “sharing faith has to be taught as an integral part of formation.” In other words, we can't just rely on those who have the gift of evangelism to share the good news. We should all be involved because it's an important part of growing to be like Christ.

Jones feels that churches don't spend enough time teaching how “evangelism can be *formative*, not just proof of formation.” She challenges churches to do a better job of training Christians how to share their faith. Another important reminder from Jones is that conversion is the work of the Holy Spirit. She states, “Live the truth you tell. Tell the truth you live. The rest is God's business.”

REFLECT:

- In what ways is sharing your faith part of your sanctification or spiritual formation process?
- If you have received training on how to share your faith, discuss what you learned.

Methodist Statements on Evangelism

The website of The United Methodist Church, *UMC.org*, defines *evangelism* as “the winning of persons to Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord” and says that involves “the proclamation of the gospel to individuals and groups by preaching, teaching, and personal and family visitation.” The website also explains that the word comes from “the Latin word *evangelium*, meaning good news or gospel.”

The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church, 2016, in Part IV, Section I on The Churches, states that our mission is “to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world by proclaiming the good news of God's grace and by exemplifying Jesus' command to love God and neighbor, thus seeking the fulfillment of God's reign and realm in the world.” This section also says that we respect persons of all religious faiths and defend religious freedom for everyone (§ 121).

In addition to this mission, the UMC embraces the processes of discipleship and sanctification. We make disciples as we “proclaim the gospel, seek, welcome and gather persons into the body of Christ” and “lead persons to commit their lives to God through baptism by water and the spirit and profession of faith in Jesus Christ.” Sanctification includes nurturing persons in Christian living through worship and spiritual disciplines, while also sending persons into the world to serve Christ through healing the sick, feeding the hungry, caring for the stranger, and freeing the oppressed (§ 122).

REFLECT:

- Discuss your thoughts on the phrase “winning of persons to Jesus Christ.”
- If the good news is God's grace, how would you explain that to someone who doesn't understand what grace is?
- What examples of God's grace have you experienced in your life?

Helpful Links

- A summary of the Barna Group report “Almost Half of Practicing Christian Millennials Say Evangelism Is Wrong”: <https://www.barna.com/research/millennials-oppose-evangelism/>
- Some video tips on listening and having spiritual conversations by Explore God:
 - » “The Art of Spiritual Conversations” at <https://youtu.be/fzSAozJG6bA>
 - » “Sharing Faith with Others” at <https://youtu.be/ImyoyBFKoKU>

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Next Week in FaithLink

Connecting Faith and Life

High Cost of College

by Mike Poteet

Last fall, Michael Bloomberg’s gift to fund financial aid at Johns Hopkins University drew additional attention to the high cost of undergraduate education. Why does college cost so much? How does the price of college affect students and society? How can our faith help us address this issue?

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Opening Prayer

Gracious God, we thank you for Jesus, a man who changed the world, and whose presence still resides with us through the gift of the Holy Spirit. As we discuss evangelism, soften our hearts toward those who don't have a relationship with you. Teach us to listen better, to love better, and to be better examples of your outlandish grace. Amen.

Leader Helps

- Open the session with the provided prayer or one of your own. Invite participants to take a moment to take a few deep breaths in and out. Spend a few moments in silence before praying.
- Have several Bibles on hand (or encourage participants to use smartphone Bible apps) and a marker-board and markers for writing lists or responses to reflection questions.
- Remind the group that people have different perspectives and to honor these differences by treating one another with respect as you explore this topic together.
- Be prepared to play some of the videos listed under “Helpful Links” on a smartphone or computer if your group is interested in learning more.
- Read or review highlights of each section of this issue. Use the *REFLECT* questions to stimulate discussion.
- If you have time for further Bible reflection, ask participants to pick one Scripture passage that summarizes what the good news means to them. Give participants a few minutes to reflect and search Scripture before sharing their responses.
- Close the session with the provided prayer or one of your own.

Teaching Alternatives

- Having a conversation with a Christian is different from having a conversation with a skeptic, but feeling comfortable talking about your faith is the best place to start. Watch the videos listed under “Helpful Links”; then practice having spiritual conversations. Ask everyone to divide into groups of two or three people and then discuss the following questions:
 - » What, if any, religious upbringing did you have as a child?
 - » Tell about a religious or spiritual experience you had.
 - » Do you feel comfortable calling yourself a Christian? What does that term mean to you?
 - » Where do you see God working in your life?

Closing Prayer

Loving God, at this moment, place on our hearts the name of one friend, family member, or coworker who might be in need of a listening ear. Help us to look for opportunities to have a conversation that is without judgment and filled with love. Equip us to listen well and speak well when it's time. The world needs a good word, and we are your servants; in Christ's name. Amen.