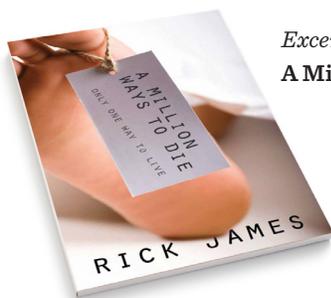




THE DEATH OF EVANGELISM

RICK JAMES



Excerpt from
A Million Ways To Die

Since the beginning, since the disciples disembarked two-by-two from the flood of Pentecost, the concepts of “death” and “evangelism” have been bound together as closely and solemnly as a suicide pact. Even Jesus’ inaugural mission briefings were coupled with strict instructions should any disciple be caught or captured:

“You must be on your guard. You will be handed over to the local councils and flogged in the synagogues. On account of me you will stand before governors and kings as witnesses to them. And the gospel must first be preached to all nations. Whenever you are arrested and brought to trial, do not worry beforehand about what to say. Just say whatever is given you at the time, for it is not you speaking, but the Holy Spirit.” (Mark 13: 9-11)

In his teaching, Jesus would often use hyperbole to sharpen his point: there is not a “splinter” in our eye that needs removing, rather an entire “plank” sticking out like a diving board. Perhaps his disciples were secretly hoping that all of the cryptic talk about being “arrested” or “handed over” was just classic Jesus hyperbole—Jesusisms. It wasn’t. It was actually understatement, as Jesus informs them they’ll be “handed over” but omits telling them to what. The “what” would include: lions, crucifixion, gladiators,

torture, stoning, burning, and beheading, but no need to get bogged down in details which they’d discover soon enough. So gruesome, in fact, was the treatment of the early Christians that the Greek word for “witness” (marturion) became synonymous with death, giving us our word “martyr.”

But the semantic migration of the word “witness” into “martyr,” isn’t merely historical irony, it’s precisely how Jesus meant for a “witness” to be defined. It is how he himself defined the role of a witness:

“I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds.” (John 12:24)

While Jesus obviously has his own death in mind as the initial inference, the statement is also a general description of the principle, pattern and nature of Christian witness and missions: How does the church grow? A kernel of wheat falls to the ground. What is the secret of evangelism? A kernel of wheat must be willing to fall to the ground. What is the power of evangelism? The falling to the ground of the kernel of wheat. What will keep the gospel from spreading? If the kernel of wheat refuses to fall to the ground. We follow the example of Jesus in his death; we are lemmings with a purpose.

I CAN'T RELATE

I think we understand this martyr concept, relating to it is the problem. Few of us have ever faced the possibility of dying as a result of our witness. I never have. At least that I know of. Perhaps I’ve foisted myself on some unwilling listener and while pontificating them into submission, they’ve secretly schemed to bludgeon me with a shoe or puncture my



voice box with a pen, but, again, not that I know of.

The truth is, most of us have never faced the threat of violence or physical death in proclaiming the gospel and most likely never will. This can leave us feeling quite removed from the whole martyr/witness concept, but not because we have a narrow view of evangelism. I think the problem is that we have a narrow view of death.

THE DEATH IN EVANGELISM

As a concept, death is much bigger than a funeral, just as love is not reducible to a wedding. The death or “cross carrying” of discipleship involves, among other things, a willingness to die, whether we are ever called to do so or not. Cross carrying discipleship is a way of life that requires a continual dying to self; a string of smaller “deaths” where we experience the cessation of life in some area of our life but not our life as a whole; i.e. the death of our reputation, the death of our pride, our ego, a dream, a relationship etc.

It’s clearly not my place or prerogative to stretch the biblical definition of death. But this expanded horizon is clearly what’s in view through the Scripture’s rather elastic use of the concept, where we are admonished to “take up our cross,” “die to sin,” “die to the world,” and so many, many other deaths beyond the funeral variety. The death envisioned is not a tombstone, but rather Arlington cemetery—row upon row of grave upon grave.

If we can stretch our understanding of death to see it more broadly, more dynamically, more biblically, I think we’ll find that to some degree we’ve already experienced death in our attempts to share Christ with others. As we begin to understand more fully the biblical principal of death, we’ll begin to view some of our past experiences in light of this understanding. I think we’ll see more clearly how we could or should have died, and how we may or might in the future. All of this is contingent on seeing death as a process, thinking of death outside of the box.

I’ll begin by sharing a recent witnessing experience: a Director’s Cut of sorts—with commentary—allowing me to point to the ways in which death is operant even in an ordinary, non-violent evangelistic encounter.

DYING IN THE U.S.A.

Recently, we had a plumber in to fix a toilet in our

home. The toilet, for some scientific reason far beyond my grasp, would not flush correctly. As a man, it’s always difficult to have someone come into your home to fix your stuff; it’s sort of an indictment of your manhood. You stand around feeling like a boy, wondering if you should hand the workman his tools like he was your dad fixing your go-cart. \$100 an hour is not enough to assuage white-collar guilt.

So as he worked on the toilet I just kind of hung around the bathroom and we naturally began to talk about sports. It was a wonderfully manly conversation, and if he harbored any ill will regarding my lack of testosterone to fix my own toilet, it certainly didn’t show. He genuinely seemed to like me and vice-versa. I’m not sure of all the reasons why, but it felt good to be liked by the plumber—Rick James, regular guy, friend to the workingman.

Well, whenever we experience feelings of acceptance or admiration or affection we, in effect, experience the sensations of life rummaging through us: motivation, energy, positive sense of self and the like. Once you’ve experienced that caffeinated jolt of life from a conversation or friend or relationship, it’s difficult to turn from it—it makes us clingy. The stronger the connection, (the more life siphoned through it) the more difficult it is to sever. This was just the plumber, but a vein had been tapped and lifeblood was beginning to flow.

As we continued to talk, the plumber eventually asked what I did for a living and I told him I was in ministry. As I already knew what he did for a living—he fixes my toilet—a more natural segue was to ask him about his spiritual background or where he went to church or something pastoral like that.

But let’s pause, because this choice to begin moving the conversation toward the gospel has some implications. The choice to point the discussion in a spiritual direction—toward Christ—typically involves a willingness to sever an emotional or relational connection, a willingness to cut yourself off from a source of life. Hmm, severing oneself from a source of life: that sounds like the definition of death. Precisely. In a small but significant way it is a death—at least in the emotional, social and relational sense. If in just under thirty minutes I had an IV line dripping life into my soul from a visiting plumber; how much greater is that lifeline flowing to me through friends, family or coworkers? How much greater the risk? Anyway the risk seemed bloody real enough even with the



plumber and yet the dying of my dignity wasn't over.

The next problem we encounter in sharing our faith is that there's no seamless or easy way to transition to the actual gospel, not in a way that you can still retain your dignity or that person's admiration and respect. Once you're down on one knee holding out the engagement ring you can't pretend your shoe is untied. You're fully committed. And once you move from nebulous chatter about feeling "blessed" and "things all happening for a reason" to actually talking about Jesus, well, you simply must regard your reputation as a casualty should that person reject it. Seriously, what sort of silky transition could you possibly devise to share Christ with the plumber, "Just as there are four rolls of toilet paper in a package of Charmin, so there are Four Spiritual Laws?" or "just as there is refuse that clogs this toilet, so our lives are a cesspool of sin which only God can flush?" There's just no way to normalize it. Oftentimes it is weird to talk about the gospel and you can't always create the illusion that it's not. There are as many great transitions into the gospel as there are into breaking off an engagement.

Now, we could lament the irrationality of this, how silly it is that talking about spiritual things should be so weird when people talk so candidly about politics or sex or nervous breakdowns. But what would be the point? The answer is both simple and obvious: we are in a spiritual battle and Satan has made it this way. It simply is. Mention Jesus in a crowded elevator and it's transformed into a dentist's waiting room: the tension is palpable. There is a powerful emotional or spiritual wall that everyone senses, and it doesn't go away by observing that it shouldn't logically be there. Our struggle is not against illogical social norms, but against spiritual powers, and those powers have created an invisible wall and this elevates the degree of sacrifice, the risk of reputational loss involved in evangelism—that's the intent. Satan knows precisely what we fear, as the Wicked Witch of the West observed: "How about a little fire, scarecrow!"

But if you can't ignore it or pretend it's not there, how do you transcend the powerful social and spiritual barriers to the gospel? The answer is: you willingly walk into the wall knowing it could knock you senseless, that people may snicker at the spectacle, and that you may be left with the dignity of Benny Hill. We all have a public or social self, an inflatable 'us' that everyone sees, and it's a painful thing to have your bubble publicly burst and be seen as a fool. And, if they

are not interested in talking about God or knowing Christ, make no mistake: they will think you're a fool.

The plumber thought I was a great guy, but in talking about Christ in any way I must anticipate that if his heart is hard, he will think I'm peculiar, ignorant, unstable, needy, deluded, or take your pick. Unless of course his heart is open to the gospel, in which case I'll become the most blessed person he's ever had the fortune to meet.

But we're not done yet. Before the witnessing opportunity has expired there are yet a few more opportunities for the ego to be turned into a pumpkin. What if they ask questions you don't know the answer to? What if you get tongue-tied? That could be, um . . . what's the word . . . humiliating. What happens if the conversation takes place between you and a family member or a good friend, and as a result things aren't the same between you? My wife and I had an evangelistic Easter gathering at our home for all of the people we knew in our neighborhood. Nobody came. That's awkward. Evangelism is a lose,lose,lose,lose,lose,lose,lose-win proposition.

When you expand the definition of death to include emotional, relational or social death; or the death of a career, upward mobility, or academic advancement; or the death of your reputation, your respect, your influence, or your authority; or the death of a friendship or social circle, this—when you've willingly placed your feeble little heart on the chopping block—is when you realize that it isn't necessary to move to Algeria in order to be a martyr.

If you're curious about the encounter with the plumber, he wasn't very interested in talking about God or faith or prayer, nothing except the Philadelphia Eagles. So, as both a Christian and a New York Giant fan, that pretty much shut the door. And while he was quite polite, I will not delude myself into thinking that he saw me as anything but a fool, for the gospel is not just a different way to look at life, it is "foolishness to those who are perishing."

THE ROLE OF EFFECTIVENESS

I find it somewhat cathartic to acknowledge the personal risks and sacrifices organic to evangelism, if for no other reason than it's an honest accounting of what many of us have experienced for years in our witness for Christ—"Hi, my name is Rick, and I am one of evangelism's silent victims. Hear my screams."



Far from being ashamed of these social disasters and public embarrassments, it's a cause of celebration. Note the honor and privilege that's ascribed to paying a price for the sake of Jesus and the gospel. Witnesses are "fools in love:"

"The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name." (Acts 5:41)

"For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him." (Phil. 1:29)

But most critically, recognizing the risk and sacrifice in evangelism allows us to see that even for us (the unpersecuted church) proclaiming the gospel involves a willingness to die. And, even if our version of death is like Martha Stewart's version of prison, it is not to be taken lightly or avoided. Nor should exemptions be sought.

Such affirmation of the social and emotional ravages of evangelism could sound like the rallying cry of the fundamentalist proletariat calling for the heads of the evangelical bourgeois who have long looked down their nose at crude and manual kingdom labor—"Oh, good Lord, did they actually make you handle a Bible Tract—savages!" It could also sound like the purest rhetoric of those who see all cultural accommodations and evangelistic strategies as pandering and watering down the gospel. It is neither.

That there are more socially appropriate ways to communicate the gospel, to me, seems undeniable. My good friend, Keith Davy, runs Research and Development for Campus Crusade for Christ. His experience and knowledge of evangelism is vast, and due to whatever stereotypes this may conjure up, I need to add that he's one of the most winsome souls on the planet. He teaches organizations, churches, and anyone willing to listen, the most relationally endearing approach to evangelism you could imagine (it's called CoJourners). Keith asks questions even the ACLU couldn't find offensive, questions like, "On your spiritual journey do you see yourself as moving closer to or further away from God?" It's disarming, engaging, non-confrontational, and filled with grace.

There's no question—in my mind anyway—that this is more effective in communicating gospel content, not because it removes the offense of the gospel but

because it removes the offense of us. For example, I could zealously approach a non-believer and say, "Hey, skillet head, want to trust Christ?" I think we all could agree that it would be more effective to delete "Hey, skillet head" from my introduction, for the offense of referring to someone's head as a skillet has nothing to do with the offense of the gospel. There are all kinds of ways in our content, approach, and tone that we track our own mud into the conversation, causing unnecessary offense that has nothing to do with the gospel. We honor God by taking this seriously, by striving to remove stumbling blocks that stand between an individual and Christ.

What is the old expression, "balance is just that brief moment in the middle as the pendulum swings in the other direction"? Embracing the death and sacrifice in evangelism does not lead to a "knee-jerk" away from effectiveness, rather it restores the balance: relational principles of effectiveness are held in tension with spiritual principles of effectiveness, and communication skills and apologetic tactics are a compliment to the persuasion of humility and the Holy Spirit, not a substitute for them.

THE POWER OF EVANGELISM

I spend a disproportionate amount of time thinking about such questions, as I work alongside the research and development department of an evangelistic organization. I've noticed a disturbing trend in my thinking, and I see it becoming pervasive in the broader Christian community. In a desire for greater ministry effectiveness, our efforts and attention have focused almost entirely on improving relational and communication skills in evangelism to the neglect of the more important question of spiritual power and effectiveness. And there is a difference. We have reasoned that poor relationships, a lack of compassion, dismal listening skills, and insensitive communication are the source of the problem. They are a problem, no doubt about it, but not the problem.

In John 12:24, Jesus stated that, "unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds." While Jesus has his own death in mind as the initial inference, the statement is also a general description of how the Kingdom grows: How does the church grow? A kernel of wheat falls to the ground. What is the secret of evangelism? A kernel of wheat must be willing to fall to the ground. What is the power of evangelism? The falling to the ground of the kernel



of wheat. What will keep the gospel from spreading? If the kernel of wheat refuses to fall to the ground. And here we find ourselves once again: it is in our willingness to die and in our little deaths (death to ego, reputation, etc.) that spiritual power and life is unleashed.

If this thesis is correct, if this is the primary source of spiritual power in evangelism, then we should expect to find some place in the New Testament where it tells us to think less about the relational and communication issues of evangelism and more about the spiritual dynamic. Well, will you look at this...

“When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit’s power, so that your faith might not rest on men’s wisdom, but on God’s power.” (1 Corinthians 2:1-5)

Paul willingly divested himself of status, becoming a fool so that God’s Spirit might shine through him. This is what endowed his evangelistic efforts with spiritual power—so he says. I’m sure he didn’t try to offend anyone, just refused to protect his reputation or manage his public image. Notice the correlation he draws: it is the willingness to suffer emotional, social and intellectual death (being seen as an idiot and a fool) that escalates the empowerment of the Spirit. John the Baptist, who I suspect wasn’t much of a talker, states this evangelism principle more succinctly, “He [Jesus] must become greater; I must become less” (John 3:30).

It makes perfect sense. I mean, none of us would say that conversion is a human endeavor would we? God has to work, God must persuade, God must awaken, God must convict—agreed? Following Paul’s point, from what we know of God’s character, does it make more sense to think that he would bless eloquence and emotional intelligence, or faith, humility, and a willingness to die to one’s reputation?

By going to the heart and soul of evangelism beneath the surface of words and actions, Paul completely flips our perspective and priorities. The things that make an evangelistic approach socially or relationally “ineffective” can be the very things that make it

spiritually “potent” allowing divine power to shine through all the rips and tears in our human fabric.

To awkwardly transition to the gospel and stutter and stammer our way through our words may lose us points on the social score card, but in faith, humility, and death we’ve amplified spiritual potency. This is the crux of Paul’s point. This is not an argument against using Greek philosophy or rhetoric, as some commentators suggest, but an argument for “first principles first:” that spiritual effectiveness is more important than communication effectiveness, and lackings in the later can enhance the former, keeping our focus and reliance on the power of God and not the skills of man.

Conversely, to the extent that we try to hold on to our reputation and status, try to manage our image, and seek to mitigate personal sacrifice: it is to this extent that our evangelism loses its true effectiveness in terms of spiritual power. We cannot simultaneously seek to hold on to our lives while attempting to give life away. I mean, we can, but the two end up canceling each other out, netting a sum of spiritual power somewhere around zero.

There is clearly an evangelistic anemia within the country. We’ve all sensed it. People seem inoculated and immune to the gospel. Ironically, after statistics are harvested and the polls close, we extrapolate from the data that the answer to our evangelistic impotence is . . . even better communication, strategies, and relationship skills. It’s important to remember that the reason Paul needed to defend his oratory mediocrity to the Corinthians (“My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words . . .”) was because they had twisted things around, overemphasizing personality, intellect, communication, sophistication, and social intelligence. They saw these as the power of ministry, and therefore ministry ineffectiveness could only be attributed to their absence.

An important word of clarification: As faith and stewardship are compliments, the physical and spiritual are meant to integrate. God’s power in evangelism is supposed to integrate with our stewardship, our careful handling of the gospel. That’s why effectiveness in communication is important. Paul is not pitting one against the other. The Corinthians had done that. Paul is attempting to rebalance the equation, reminding them of the all-important spiritual principles that are at play



in evangelism, where weak is strong and incapable means dependant. He redirects their thoughts from communication effectiveness toward spiritual effectiveness, where God's resurrection power freely flows as we, his witnesses, willingly die to ourselves. We in fact compromise evangelism's effectiveness when we seek to save our lives in the process of giving the gospel away.

REPENT OR DIE

On 42nd and Broadway there was, once upon a time, an Hispanic man with a megaphone and a placard that read 'Repent: Hell is Real.' He may still be there. On a personal level this is about as far from the way I approach evangelism as, well, something that's really far away from something else. But in the mid 80's evangelicals were about as numerous as Incas in New York City, so I went over to say hello. His personality was unlike anything you would have anticipated. He was about the kindest, most soft-spoken, most gracious person you are ever likely to meet, at least in New York City.

After we had introduced ourselves, he said to me with the greatest of urgency, "Brother Rick, we must warn these people. They don't know; they don't see it. We must tell them of the love of the Lord Jesus. Here are some flyers, you go on that side [of the street] and hand them out and I will stay on this side and hand them out. Blessings to you brother Rick."

If his placard was—let's see, how should I put it—"startling," the flyer was even more "eye-catching." I worked in an ad agency on Madison Avenue a few blocks away, and as I handed them out I was desperately praying that no one from my office would walk by. Perhaps the Holy Spirit would have given me the words to say, but I cannot fathom how I would have explained my behavior short of that an alien had inhabited my body.

If there ever was a living stereotype of the guy with the megaphone, placard and thumping Bible, this was the guy, because, well, he had a megaphone, a placard and a Bible that he thumped.

Evangelism done well or not so well raises questions in our mind about effectiveness and appropriateness, as well it should. Even in the Book of Acts we are exposed to both successful and less than successful missionary initiatives:

"In Lystra there sat a man crippled in his feet, who was lame from birth and had never walked. He listened to Paul as he was speaking. Paul looked directly at him, saw that he had faith to be healed and called out, "Stand up on your feet!" At that, the man jumped up and began to walk. When the crowd saw what Paul had done, they shouted in the Lycaonian language, "The gods have come down to us in human form!" Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul they called Hermes because he was the chief speaker." (Acts: 8-12)

Being worshipped as Zeus and Hermes was not the desired outcome Paul and Barnabas were looking for. Somewhere communication broke down. Given the outcome, I wonder if they would have approached the city of Lystra differently if they had it to do over again? Maybe the whole misunderstanding was avoidable. Maybe, maybe not. This is always the question isn't it: could we have been more effective in our witness? Unfortunately, the answer is always "yes." I've rewritten this paragraph three times and could have done it another thirty—there's always a better way to say everything.

RISK AVOIDANCE

I saw a commercial for some abdominal "blasting" mechanism that was guaranteed to give me the "abs" I've long admired on the male mannequins in the underwear isle. The motion of the gizmo seemed to mimic the reclining mechanism of a Lazy-boy, and apparently if I played on this toy for 30 minutes a day, rippling hills of muscle would emerge from the flabby mounds of my midsection. I haven't consulted a trainer about this, but I'm pretty sure muscle develops through pain and not lounging. And yet we all want to believe in the existence of a pain-free shortcut.

When I hear of a diet that promises weight-loss while eating anything I want—I'll tell you what I want—I want it to be true. I want to believe I can get something for nothing: I'll buy one of anything if I can get the second free.

I don't know if this way of thinking is something to be fixed, but it's certainly something we need to recognize about ourselves. We need to be suspicious of our motives, especially in areas of our faith that require sacrifice, suffering, discomfort, or for us to count the cost of discipleship in some way. Evangelism is such an area: in fact, within our culture, it's perhaps the only area where Christians pay a price



for Kingdom membership and privileges.

And therefore it is in this area that we need to be the most distrustful and paranoid of our flesh: we should assume our flesh is seeking a short cut or a way out, looking to cut cost, minimize risk, and scheming of ways that a kernel of wheat can produce a crop without actually falling to the ground (John 12:24). Why so paranoid of our flesh? Because our efforts to detour pain will be well-justified and well-concealed even from ourselves. As there are a million ways to die, there are at least that many ways to avoid it. Here are mine—tactics I’ve used over the years to avoid the death in evangelism. My research on me has produced one profound observation; we are all geniuses in at least this one area: saving our own skin.

APOLOGETIC ARMOR

Apologetics is a field of Christian study that explores the reasons for belief, and teaches how to defend one’s Faith against philosophical attack. Like most people, my interest in apologetics came out of my own wrestlings, as well as a need to answer the questions friends were asking about my faith. But whenever you bulk up intellectually or physically, you run the risk of becoming a bully. It feels good not to be pushed around, it feels good to kick sand in someone else’s ideology.

Over years of study and years of ministry I got rather good at winning debates, defending the faith, and frustrating critics. People wanted to take me with them to do ministry in the way you want a defensive lineman with you in the bad part of town.

But I became convicted regarding my dependence and desire for logic, persuasion and bullying when I thought deeply about this text.

He told them, “The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field. Go! I am sending you out like lambs among wolves. Do not take a purse or bag or sandals; and do not greet anyone on the road.” (Luke 10:2-5)

What struck me was how intentional Jesus was to equip his disciples with absolute vulnerability: no food, no place to stay, no lineman to protect them in the bad part of town. He basically sent them out in their underwear. It dawned on me that I had used apologetics to avoid vulnerability, as a pelt or hide to

protect me from the harsher elements of evangelism. Now why would I do that? Because I wanted to avoid the death of my reputation and I didn’t want to be seen as foolish or ignorant. The way I saw it, was if someone wanted to reject Christ, that’s fine, but they were going to be the one who looked like an idiot, not me.

Further adding to my warped perspective, was the respect and admiration this garnered from my Christian community. Not only was I refusing to die to my reputation, I was feeding it: not simply avoiding the “L” of “loser” but sporting a large “S” on my chest.

Apologetics clothed me in armor, kept me impervious to attack, protected me from suffering any loss (emotionally, socially and intellectually) and, an added bonus; people admired how I looked in chainmail.

I still struggle with the inclination to save myself in this way, but I can recognize the threads of self-preservation in it as well as recognize its ultimate fruitlessness: that in seeking to save my life, I’m actually draining life from the power of my witness. These days, when I find my thoughts and motivation heading down this path, God has shown me a simple but effective exit strategy: I intentionally utter or share something that decreases me in the eyes of my listening audience.

For example, there was this public debate I was invited to with the head of the New Jersey Atheists Network on the campus of Kean College. As the debate began, we each made our opening comments, and at first I was wonderfully reliant upon the Lord, terrified as to how I would do in the debate, and desperately seeking God’s wisdom. But the more points I scored and the more “penetrating” my insight, the more difficult it became to keep my ego stuffed behind the podium. The next thing you know I’m quoting Kant and Hume as if I’ve actually read them, which I haven’t. I was very much alive; I was larger than life, and growing larger by the moment; I was ballooning into the marshmallow man in Ghostbusters, Garfield in the Macy’s Day Parade. Then it hit me, “What difference does any of this make if people don’t come to Christ? And how is God’s power going to be released through my pride and arrogance?”

So, in my closing argument I elected not to hide behind the footnotes of any great philosopher, but instead said something simple and intentionally



deflating, something to the effect of, “I think what’s really important here is Jesus. He longs to have a relationship with each and every one of you . . .” In the intellectual environment I’m sure I sounded like a moron. I know I did. I fell on my sword, but God’s Spirit was much more powerfully at work in and through my dead carcass than he was when I was alive, resplendent and clothed in glory.

Apologetics have their place, but that place is not as a firewall between us and death. They are not a means to bring greater glory and life to our self, but greater glory to Christ and life to others.

A MARGINAL AUDIENCE

Take a moment to imagine my scenario of sharing with the plumber from the last chapter, only this time picture me talking to a homeless man instead. If you were able to imagine it, you probably would have sensed an emotional downshift. Sharing the gospel with a homeless man is not as threatening as sharing with a friend, neighbor or coworker, and the reason is as tragic as it is true. I care significantly less what a homeless man thinks of me than what an active member of my social circle thinks of me. Furthermore, there are none of the traditional social norms to contend with, so there’s no awkwardness: what could possibly be socially inappropriate to someone who lives in a cardboard box?

Since I derive no life from this man, I derive no death if rejected. And this is why such types of outreach and ministry have always been easiest for me. I don’t think I’m alone in feeling this way, for it’s been my observation that these dear souls hear the gospel quite a bit more than the average businessperson and quite a bit more than my actual neighbors. Part of the reason is of course the great compassion of God’s people, but what I learn when I take a close look at my own heart is that part of the reason is a desire to serve Christ while minimizing personal risk.

In no way am I suggesting we do less outreach to the homeless; please do not hear me saying that. This wonderful means of ministry has only surfaced a less than wonderful tactic of self-protection: that I avoid evangelism in the relational networks where I have the strongest bonds and greatest platform because it is in these spheres that I also have the most to lose.

I AM RELEVANT

I’ve always held to a belief that evangelistic engagement with the culture means speaking to that culture in a language it understands. If wearing a T-shirt over my thermal undershirt and letting my facial hair seed into a sensitive aesthetic of virility gets you to listen to me, then dude, that’s how I’ll roll.

Access to students is everything in campus ministry, and the Password and Username to gain that access is dorm programming. Resident Hall directors must provide educational programs for their students, and they’re so desperate for content they’ll invite you in to teach the students how to make a pipe bomb. But if you want students to actually attend, the big attraction in dorm programming is the Self Defense lesson. Learning how to gouge the eyes out of a would-be attacker with a set of car keys is quality programming. From a misspent youth, I actually had the credentials to teach martial arts and so I offered to teach a Self Defense program —free of charge—on dorm floors all over campus. The demonstrations were impressive as this was several decades ago, before I looked like Elvis in my karate suit. Students loved it. Students loved me. I was Jack Bauer and I was relevant, and this gave me a unique platform for ministry and access to students.

But along with making it onto the student playlist, came an increasing sense of spiritual vacuousness. Everyone wanted to talk to me, just not about Christ. My confidence was brimming, but it was flowing from my newfound relevance, and while this helped to connect me to my audience, it was at the same time unplugging me from humble dependence upon God.

I often hear young believers say, “I want people to know you can still be cool and be a Christian.” I understand what they’re saying even though I’m only relevant these days in my obsolescence—cool, hip and handsome in the way Woody Allen is cool, hip and handsome. While the motivation for this kind of thinking is endearing, it does seem to misunderstand the difference between worldly cool and spiritually cool. Humility, brokenness, love and grace are what the spiritual in-crowd are wearing this year and every year. Spiritual cool unleashes the power of the Spirit to convict, convert and point toward Jesus, while worldly cool points you to my hip rectangular reading glasses and my SIGG water bottle. As Jesus said, “a student is not above [or cooler than] his teacher” and he proclaimed the gospel from a platform of weakness, brokenness and death.



Relevance can better connect you to the audience you're trying to reach and there's not a darn thing wrong with that. But we have to be sensitive to our desire for others to find us attractive, for this goal of having others see us a certain way can override the true power of evangelism—death. Peace-out.

STRAWMEN AND STEREOTYPES

The fact that those who engage in initiative evangelism are lampooned is neither here nor there. Those who engage in it, as I have at times, know what they've signed up for and have been blessed with sufficiently thick skin for their calling. More problematic is that the ghosts of Charles Finney and Billy Sunday provide a rationale to avoid evangelism, to avoid a type of death. It's not like we're lining up for the lethal injection, excited to die for our faith to begin with. So when you come to believe that to do so is actually counterproductive or harmful to the gospel, why in the world would you do it? You wouldn't.

I know the zealots are out there, but I think there are more rumors about zealots than actual zealots. I just don't personally know of anyone bowling people down with a Sam's Club sized Bible, do you? I can't think of anyone in my church wagging a finger at the evils of whoredom, demon moonshine, and moving picture shows. The reality of my community is that there are only a couple of churches that even believe in evangelism, and the vast majority of these congregations don't engage in it.

Yet the specter of this stereotype haunts all discussions on evangelism and outreach. He's everyone's excuse and everyone's scapegoat. He's the excuse that unbelievers site for wanting no part of the church and the excuse believers site for not sharing with them. It's hard to get at reality. Statistics show that vast numbers of unbelievers have been "turned off" by Christian evangelism. But then again I view every salesman as an annoyance unless I want their product and it's difficult to reconcile this with statistics showing Christians don't really share their faith anymore.

The reality of the caricature is perhaps immaterial, the shadow of it is real enough and this is all that matters—this is the only excuse my flesh needs to keep my head safely tucked down, out of harms way and away from anything that may cause social or emotional discomfort.

IN THE NAME OF EFFECTIVENESS

My daughter just returned from one of her missionary endeavors to the homeless in downtown Philadelphia where she dispensed food, blankets (I think), as well as conversation and companionship. It made me proud that she was involved in this amazing ministry of compassion and by proud I mean my flesh, would in some way like to take credit for it or her, though I can do neither. My daughter also loves to share her faith, and on this day of outreach someone suggested to her that talking about Christ to the homeless was not such a wise idea, as it could compromise the "effectiveness" of the outreach if there was an "evangelistic agenda" and if the food was not given completely "in love," but with "strings attached."

This is not the book or place to thoughtfully explore this. But what I want to point out is the many presuppositions about evangelistic effectiveness and how they can lead to not doing evangelism at all. Do we really know, for instance, that having an agenda for someone's spiritual well being is a negative thing (and that Jesus doesn't have such an agenda); that it's possible to love someone without having an agenda; that it's not loving to be concerned about a person's soul; that giving a person physical food has less of an agenda than providing spiritual food; that the gospel is not powerful independent of providing food; and I'll stop here because you get the point.

I don't know if any of these presuppositions can be affirmed, yet I do know with certainty that no one heard the good news of Jesus Christ that day, and that the reason given was greater evangelistic "effectiveness."

For me "greater effectiveness" can be just the excuse I'm looking to avoid putting my life on the line—my reputation, honor, status, and dignity. I would love to believe that any form of evangelism that causes me fear or anxiety or is socially stressful or awkward, is ineffective and therefore unnecessary. I would love to believe this so much that I cannot be too paranoid in scrutinizing my motives or presuppositions about what's spiritually effective. And, I always sober myself with the fact that the Corinthians profoundly believed Paul's manner, approach, and presentation of the gospel to be terribly uncouth.

Describing our human perspective of spiritual reality, Paul says that, "now we see in a mirror dimly" (1Cor. 13:12), and I don't think we could find a better word



picture than a mirror. For a mirrored image is physical reality inverted. Spiritual reality is the compliment of physical reality: the mirrored image, male to Female. Like the Corinthians we are often enamored with physical reality: what works, what looks good, sounds good, has style. But spiritual reality operates upon different principles of beauty, power, persuasion, and effectiveness—opposing principles. The spiritual kingdom is inverted like your face in the mirror—weakness is strength, servanthood is leadership, humility is power. In the spiritual kingdom death is the key to life, and this is why those who proclaim life are always in some, way, shape, or form, martyrs (witnesses).

And, speaking of inverted images, we've been surveying the ways in which we fail as witnesses, seeking to run away from death rather than embrace it. But in the end, why we fail in our witness is not nearly as important as how we might succeed, how we might acquire the coveted label of "faithful witness" (Revelation 2:13). So let's look at the prettier picture.

Having surveyed the ways in which we fail as witnesses, seeking to run from death, we need to look at the mirrored image. In the end, why we fail in our witness, is not nearly as important as how we might succeed, how we might acquire the coveted label of "faithful witness" (Revelation 2:13).

READY AND WILLING TO DIE

It is not insignificant to think about what you would do if you were put in a situation in which witnessing for Christ might put your life in jeopardy. Not insignificant, but certainly not very relevant for most us. What is relevant is the choices we make each day in this regard, and it's from these daily choices that we can extrapolate outward to the if-someone-put-a-gun-to-your-head scenario. Here the concern, as it is the concern of this book, is that in focusing on the big D of death we entirely miss the little d's: the daily deaths which wholly comprise the Christian life, making it one long cross-carrying affair.

I cannot tell you how many hundreds of times I have shared the gospel in my years of ministry. I can tell you that for every occasion where I said "yes" to the Spirit, I've also said "No, I'm tired, I'm off the clock, get someone else." The difference in my responses lies in the choice of how I will approach that day: either open to how God will use me, or focused on accomplishing my agenda. It really is that simple, simple to describe,

that is.

Whenever I leave my home for any extended period of time I usually take my laptop with me. And in just about any location that I open my computer, it reminds me that as I sit there occupying a space in physical reality, there is an invisible highway of communication going on around me: messages and images flying through my head (though I haven't checked with my tech friends as to the veracity of the claim that images are literally whizzing through my head—they wouldn't know to go around me, right?).

And so I have a choice to make: do I connect to the wifi network or do I live in peaceful obliviousness to it. The question is always answered by cost analysis: sometimes I'm willing to pay to be in the hotspot, sometimes I'm not.

Whenever I venture out into the world of people, I have the same fundamental choice to make regarding witness and mission. The simple question that comes onto my screen of consciousness is "Are you open to being used . . . or not?" "Are you available to be led and guided toward opportunities to be a witness for Christ today . . . or not?"

If you say yes, you're on the network; you're open, awake, eyes of faith darting everywhere, looking for God to lead, open to however he might use you. Here's a good example of this openness that's still in my inbox.

My friend Warren and I have known each other for a good number of years. For the last five of those years, Warren's been spending his summers trying to get a church planted among the Cypriots, that is, the people of Cyprus. After his most recent trip to Cyprus, Warren stopped off in Europe before heading back to the U.S. He sent me this e-mail from Moldova:

"Hey, check this out. I'm in Moldova; I came a day earlier than the rest of the team because of a mix up with my ticket. So, I had to stay in a hotel last night. I got up this morning and went down stairs to have a coffee and to pray. I was sitting in the little breakfast area reading my Bible when another guy walked in to have breakfast. When the waitress asked him if he wanted coffee or tea; he said tea. I looked up from my Bible and when I looked at him I sincerely heard the Holy Spirit say to me; "that Guy is Cypriot, talk to him." So, when he sat down I said, "where are you from," he said,



“London.” He said, “Where are you from?” I said, “Virginia, but I just came from Cyprus.” He said, “I’m Cypriot, but I live in London.”

We started to talk. The Holy Spirit told me clearly that I was to share the Gospel with him. Ahhhh it was so easy; it was if he was ripe for this moment.

To live your day completely open to God’s Spirit can be just like that, like a page out of the Book of Acts. But the question of “Am I open and am I available?” is one of cost. There’s a price to be paid for being in the hotspot. The question is not just “Do you want to be on the spiritual network?” the question is “Are you willing to pay to be on the spiritual network?”

As the Apostle Paul asks the Colossians for prayer concerning his evangelism, you see both his openness and availability as well as his willingness to pay the price as he sits in chains praying that God would open doors for the gospel:

“And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains. Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should.” (Colossians 4:3,4)

These are the two fundamental questions of whether we will approach the day as a witness or a spectator: “Are you open, available, seeking open doors?” and “Are you willing to pay the price to be on the network?”

Recently I had the Cable Guy in to fix a cable that runs into our home. I hung around as he worked and we talked, and at some point in the conversation I intentionally transitioned the discussion in a spiritual direction. The transition went far better than expected. He was interested, listened, asked questions and after about twenty minutes or so he motioned me to follow him out to his truck. He opened the door to the front seat and sitting on the passenger side seat was a little gospel booklet. He tells me, “some customer just gave this to me and I was reading it out in my truck just before coming into your house—funny.”

It was really cool. It was also really terrifying. I have horrible social anxiety. I actually take Paxil for it. The idea of transitioning the conversation toward the gospel causes my stomach to churn, and that makes me feel ill and that in turn makes me want to throw up. Evangelism is and always has been very,

very challenging for me. Once I get into the gospel I’m okay— I actually get excited—but getting there is a huge struggle. I have seen God do absolutely amazing things, there’s no doubt about that, but every decision, every day that I’ve made myself available has been a calculated one, a weighing of cost.

That’s why some days, spiritually speaking, I do not go online, and why I suspect that no one is spiritually online every day, and certainly not every moment of every day. We are inadequate for both the task as well as the commitment to carry out the task which is why I think we read of Paul’s openness and willingness to suffer within the broader context of a plea for prayer, “And pray for us, too, that God may open a door” . . . “Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should” (Colossians 4:3,4). Translation: God give me the strength to be your witness, to have the courage to say what I need to say, and the passion to be willing to pay the price. Amen.

THE JOY OF DEATH

It’s always difficult to shift our thinking, and it does take a shift to see the little deaths and mini martyrdoms that are a part of being a witness for Christ. As it’s not wise to jerk someone’s head around too much, it is with some hesitancy that I bring up this additional—and I promise the last— shift in evangelistic perspective: not only should we think of evangelism in terms of death, but we should think of our death in terms of joy. Let’s preface this with a wonderful John Piper quote:

“And I pray for awakening and revival. And I try to preach to create a people that are so God-saturated that they will show and tell God everywhere and all the time.”

If you want to find something written by John Piper online you can either Google “Piper” or the word “saturated.” Piper uses “saturated” because no other word, with the exception of “brimming,” disrobes the concept he is trying to convey like “saturated.” Actually the word “passion” does but it’s been gutted of meaning due to overuse, which is why I suspect he has swapped in “saturated.” The essence of passion is this: you’re not just willing to sacrifice for Christ, you want to. You are so utterly consumed, so intensely passionate, so brimming with joy in the person of Christ, that sacrifice and suffering are the only vehicles adequate to express it, satisfy it, spend it, or satiate it.



For while it's essential that we recognize the death intrinsic to evangelism, our perspective would still be badly skewed if we saw our sacrifice as something given reluctantly or begrudgingly, or manufactured by a sheer act of the will.

When we are saturated and brimming with Christ, joy overflows its banks, surging an impulse to suffer and sacrifice for Christ. This is passion: a moth deliriously happy and headed for the flame. But we are not always so gloriously consumed and choices will sometimes need to be made out of convictions and commitments that were forged when passion was in a molten state. So be it.

Whether we face the deaths of evangelism with apprehension and trepidation (“but with the help of our God we dared to tell you his gospel in spite of strong opposition.” 1Thess. 2:2), or urgently run to them in order “to make our joy complete” (1John 1:4), embracing them isn't optional for a witness.

For as Paul so bluntly observed, “I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church” or to paraphrase “your salvation is due to Christ's death alone, but I had to die in order to bring it to you.”

“There are, aren't there” said Lewis, “only three things we can do about death: to desire it, to fear it, or to ignore it.”

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