

BE062208

Who Do You Love?

15. Sharing your faith

I don't know why, but it seems that each time I have the honor and privilege to stand here before you, God places on my heart something to confess! Maybe it's because I have so MUCH to confess...that's true, or maybe it's because there's something for all of us here at AC3 to learn from one of these confessions, or both. But regardless, it's where I feel lead to start today.

Up until about 3 months ago, I had never lead anyone to Christ. And for years, more than anything else, all I wanted to do was to be there in that moment when I could lead someone in that prayer and then open my eyes on the glowing countenance of a sinner saved by grace.

Oh, I wanted that. I was jealous...I mean it I coveted...I SINNED when I thought of others who had been gifted with that experience. Look up ironic in the dictionary, and you'll find that scenario: I sinned over wanting to lead someone in the sinner's prayer. As silly and as embracing as it is: it's true.

I have wondered if maybe I'm just not called to be one of those people who "closes the deal". Maybe I just set 'em up and someone else knocks' 'em down. I've also seriously considered the idea that God is protecting me (and a litany of young Christians) by preventing me from actually getting hold of this pride-producing experience.

In other words, until I learn to hold more loosely whatever role I might play in someone's salvation, God's not going to let me hold it. Think of an over-eager kid who wants to hold a newborn baby...what do YOU do?

Now...again, those things might be true. They probably are to some extent: I may not be wired for that kind of interaction, and God might be working out some pride problems in me – but there's something else at work here that affects all of us, something I've quietly wondered about and only recently have felt like I could talk about it, and had the forum in which to do so. Here it is:

I don't think that the sinner's prayer is all that Christians have cracked it up to be.

Like I said, I've kind of wondered about this in the dark recesses of my mind for some time, but never really let the thought form until Rick sent me an article from Dr. Larry Moyer.

Moyer asks the question, "Is that prayer essential to salvation?"

Well to answer, we've got to back up. What did Christ accomplish on the cross? He satisfied the wrath of a holy God against our sin. As he died as our substitute, he declared, "It is finished." (John 19:30) Through his death and resurrection, he paid for all the wrongs we have done. Our sin account was paid in full. That is why God can now extend eternal life as a gift .

A gift, though, can be rejected or received. So how does one receive the gift of eternal life?

We are told in John 20:31, "But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name." John 1:12 reads, "But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name." John's best known verse reads, "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life." (John 3:16)

The word "believe" means to trust. Acknowledging that I am a sinner, I must come to God recognizing that his son took the punishment for my sins and rose again, and trust in Christ alone to save me. I acknowledge to God, "If you cannot take me to heaven, I am going to hell. You and you alone are my only way to eternal life." At that second, we are as certain of heaven as though we are already there. Eternal life begins at that moment. In the moment before I trusted Christ, I was literally terminal. The moment I trusted in Him, my eternal life began.

Let's just take a moment and let that sink in shall we...you who have trusted in Christ are RIGHT NOW living an eternal life...it has already begun and will culminate in his presence. Jesus' promise was, "He who believes in Me has everlasting life." (John 6:47) This is no small thing!

But here's the question Moyer asks: what part does saying a prayer have to do with salvation? Absolutely nothing.

We are not saved by saying a prayer. We are saved by trusting Christ. That's why Christ could look at the thief on the cross and say, "Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in paradise." (Luke 23:43) Nothing is ever said of the thief "saying a prayer".

That does not mean saying a prayer at the moment one comes to Christ is wrong. In fact it's very right...a desire to speak to the Father who just saved us makes sense, and it's highly appropriate! But the PRAYER is a RESPONSE to an EVENT and the event (accepting Christ) is the point.

Now we could spend the rest of our time un-packing the theological ramifications to this, and we might do just that at another time, but this talk is about sharing our faith...leading people to trusting Christ. But many of us have been taught to lead people to say a prayer that may or may not have anything to do with trusting Christ!

Let me illustrate. How many of you know a school teacher who has been certified by the State of Washington...passed all the mandatory courses, met all the legal requirements for teaching...yet is a terrible teacher. Un-motivated. ignorant. misinformed, unprofessional...maybe even hates kids.

Ever met a cop who earned the badge but couldn't care less about protecting, and served only himself? Pick your favorite elected official who legitimately obtained their authority but has absolutely no character, leadership or vision.

Am I making my point? Having criteria for entrance into a select group, (like those saved by Christ) is not in itself bad...but it's a CRITEREON...it's not the salvation itself. Just because a man says a prayer does not make him a Christian anymore than a man taking an oath of office makes him a leader.

That's why today I want to challenge us to change our focus from that thing I coveted so much (praying that prayer with someone) to walking beside someone as they learn to trust Christ.

Am I making sense? In our up-coming Dishmixer "Just Walk Across the Room" we WILL talk about what to do and how to handle that moment when someone trusts Christ...but with the rest of our time today, I want to talk about the dozens...hundreds THOUSANDS of moments that we share with non-Christians every-day, that might just be the moment RIGHT BEFORE the moment they trust Christ.

When these moments involve another human being, it's always in the context of a **SPIRITUAL CONVERSATION**. Think about it...there's got to be SOME kind of spiritual dialogue going on just prior to someone putting their trust in Christ...and you and I can never know for sure when that moment is, because it's the Holy Spirit who does the saving. So our job is simply to make sure the table is always set.

There are ways we can intentionally start spiritual conversations. Now these are not "sales" tricks...because remember you're no longer pushing for the "sale" of a certain prayer...you're just creating a dialogue; a conversation.

In his book "Becoming a Contagious Christian", Bill Hybels describes 6 styles of starting spiritual conversations and I want to introduce you to these six styles.

Now on Thursday, as I was working on this message, I was asking God to give me some good illustrations for each of the 6 styles, and He came through in a really cool way. It was about 12:30, and as I prayed, He brought to mind how I had unconsciously used three of the 6 methods already that day. Wow! It's not credit to me...God was just providing opportunities. I felt like God asked me to pray for three more opportunities...and guess what: He answered. Three more chances came to me over the rest of the day, each one a chance to use one of the different styles of engaging in a spiritual conversation.

So for each of the following 6 styles, I'm going to give you a Bible passage that illustrates the style (and you can write that passage in your notes, look up that passage later and read it in detail) and I'll give you the story of how I got the chance to use that style...all in one pretty typical day last week.

Confrontational? (Acts 2:1-41) Repent and be baptized, save yourselves from this corrupt generation.

Intellectual? (Acts 17:15-31) Paul debated with the philosophers on Mars Hill to convince them.

Testimonial? (John 9:1-38) One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!

Relational? (Mark 5:1-19) Go home to your family and tell them how much the Lord has done for you.

Invitational? (John 4:1-30) The Samaritan woman at the well begged the people of the city to come and hear Jesus for themselves.

Serving? (Acts 9:32-39) Dorcas impacted her city by doing deeds of kindness.

Now listen to this: according to our survey: 100% of AC3 leaders have invited at least one person to a Connection Service over the last year. 86.1% invited at least 3 different people. That's great! Invitational method.

Seeds of Grace reports that in one week last month, over 200 different families were served at our Distribution Center. That's great! Serving method.

One of our AC3 families open's their home to teens and 20-somethings every Tuesday night, just to hang out in a safe place, have meal and get to rub shoulders with "church people". Last week over 50 kids dropped in. That's great! Relational.

Most days, each of us is going to major in one area of spiritual conversation. We have entire ministries majoring on one style! But other days, you'll be called to stretch, into a new style that you're not as comfortable with, or maybe two, or maybe all 6! Are you ready? Are you willing to just have the conversation? Yes? Then God can use you.

BARRIERS

Now here is where a lot of us get held up, and frankly where I think a lot of us then fail. We encounter a barrier. A road block, an objection. When we're aiming at this moment when someone says a certain prayer, and something pops up that makes the likely hood of someone saying the "sinners prayer" low or non-existent, we mistakenly think we've failed. But we're wrong. It's only when you stop the conversation that we've failed.

Imagine having coffee with your buddy from work. She talks about her struggling marriage. You share with her about how your relationship with Christ saw you through a similar time in YOUR marriage (which method?)

Then, at the end of your story, your buddy says something like, "Well, I'm glad that worked out for you. But if there is a God, it doesn't seem like he's very concerned with my problems. I've prayed for Him to help before, but nothing's happened."

See...that may seem like "failure", but really it's just a change in the topic of conversation! Friend, this particular example is GOOD NEWS! Your friend has now opened the door to a REAL talk about God's character, which is where we hope they'll finally focus anyway! This is an opportunity to share from scripture! To get your friend's focus off their spouse's short comings, and on to their own need for forgiveness.

But all too often we see a change in topic as failure, as closing off the conversation altogether , and so we quit.

Christian, you have to be ready to deal with barriers...not by forcing your way over them or through them, but by letting them re-direct the conversation. Hopefully you're already praying that the Holy Spirit will direct your relationship...but did you ever stop to think he might just actually answer that prayer?! He might just be re-directing the conversation from this person's

need for a job to their need for security? God just might be lobbing a big old slow ball right over the plate, and you think you've just struck out!

Begin by changing your mind set from one of "I gotta get 'em to pray prayer "x" , to one of "How can I continue the conversation and keep guiding it deeper and deeper until, in God's time, they come face to face with their need for Him.

Next, get familiar with the set of basic barriers that most people set-up, and then learn how to deal with each barrier. Briefly here they are:

- **Bad Doctrine.** People frequently think they have an objection to Jesus Christ , when in fact they have an objection to crappy teaching from a TV preacher, an ignorant school teacher, or a hypocritical neighbor. More often than not, these barriers can be overcome with simple, corrective information, "Wow! I wouldn't want a relationship with THAT God either! But my God isn't like that..." Go onto explain the truth.
- **Intellectual Road blocks.** This includes a lot of the things we're covering on our current Connection series: Reliability of the Bible, the problem of pain, the exclusivity of Christ. My first choice would be that you familiarize yourself so completely with the reason why you, personally, DO believe, that when someone raises an intellectual roadblock, you simply talk about what you already know. The truth is though, none of us has ALL the answers...so say "I don't know..." to their objection and then GOOGLE it and get back to them for crying out loud! Have them e-mail Rick, get your Bible out and look into it together...INVITE them to a church service where the topic is being addressed...but don't just let it drop!
- **The Grace Road Block** while this is truly a doctrinal barrier, it's SO prevalent that it gets its own category. Many, many people simply can't get their minds around grace...the fact that Jesus Christ paid the price for their sins, that the work is finished and that they can enter into His love without ever being "good enough". We'll learn more detailed ways to address this roadblock in our JWAR Dishmixer coming up July 13th
- **No fun** Sometimes people come against the reality that to cross the line of faith means that they're going to lose some things they've come to depend on...whether it's an addiction, a relationship that might be at risk or any number of other behaviors...we must be ready to walk our friends through a cost/benefit analysis where we simply compare the promise of purpose and hope in this life and eternity of joy in the life beyond with _____ .

AC3, as cool as our connection service is, you should know that it only accomplishes so much. As great as Rick's teaching, Johnna's leadership and my drumming is...it's only ONE KIND of spiritual conversation. On any given week, it can't accomplish in the lives of 400 people, what could be accomplished by 400 people going out and having their OWN conversations.

As we begin to wrap up all our survey, interview and research work for our 5 year strategic plan, I have many voices of AC3r's ringing in my ears: the vast majority of them saying how much they love their church – how they love the authenticity, the chance to be themselves, to feel SAFE. But about half of you describe that safety in terms of being left alone, un-fettered

and being able to move on your spiritual journey at your own pace. The other half of you describe that same sense of safety in terms of being reached out to, having someone walk across the room, pursue you...

So which is it, friends? Well the only thing we know for sure at this point is that it's both. It takes different kinds of conversation to reach different people.

Those of you who look at the Lobby of AC3 and see nothing but a cold expanse, a relational waste land where no one ever reaches out to you or your friends, where seekers are lost every week because no one says hello – well friend, Rick and I can't fix it for you. Perhaps YOU are being called to change the "conversation" in the Lobby. Who else is going to do it?

Those of you who look at the Lobby and see nothing but a mine field of social pressures, theologically booby trapped conversations and coffee stains on your new white shirt – well friend, your leaders are doing what they can (We'll be moving to a building with a BIGGER Lobby early next year..YEAH!)...but that's not the BIG solution...your leaders can't fix all of it for you. Perhaps YOU are being called to make your home or small group a safer place for those who need to take their time getting connected. Who else is going to do it?