

What comes into your mind when I say the word, “evangelism”? An image probably just popped into your head. Our minds are like picture galleries with the walls filled with scenes and images that drive our lives. What we think about evangelism affects how we do evangelism. But the times are changing and we need to hang some new pictures.

I’ve typically trained people to “close the deal” in evangelism. Successful evangelism was pictured as a logical presentation of the gospel with an invitation to respond. Evangelism’s success was found in the numbers of presentations and the decisions made. Is this picture still relevant?

Every survey of today’s American culture indicates that the starting point for evangelism has moved. The numbers of people who are irreligious or non-religious are increasing. We’ve moved from a Christian consensus to a culture disinterested, apathetic, and uninformed of the Christian message. Our neighbors, coworkers, and even family members are often isolated from the church’s influence. We can no longer count on a common base of knowledge or interest for people to grasp Jesus’ good news.

I concluded that something had changed when doing campus evangelism in the 1980s. In reading the Bible with students, I realized that they didn’t understand what the little numbers beside the sentences meant or that John and Paul weren’t members of The Beatles. Believing in someone who died 2,000 years ago was irrelevant to most students. This could have been disheartening except for one thing. They wanted to talk about Jesus. I resolved to keep the conversation going.

Evangelism today needs to be pictured as an on-going conversation. Keeping the conversation going means watching the Holy Spirit move people from interest, to insight, to conviction. The New Testament illustrates this process. The Apostle Paul tapped into the interest of people at Mar’s Hill (Acts 17:16-34). Jesus led the woman at the well from interest to deeper insight (John 4:25-26). Phillip guided the Ethiopian eunuch to conviction (Acts 8:37). This process of mini-decisions is wrapped up in conversations. My friend Will is a good example of this.

Will entered a Bible reading group as a professed agnostic. He didn’t deny God but he wasn’t interested in finding Him either. Over months, Will read the Gospels of Mark and John, discussing the Bible’s meaning within a group of seekers. We kept the conversation going. Over time, Will moved from indifference, to interest, to insight. At one point, we asked ourselves, “Has Will trusted Christ?” Will has crossed the line and is now a disciple multiplying his life. Will’s friend Ben started the same journey months ago and has now embraced the Savior. The conversation keeps going.

People’s needs in each stage are different. Cultivating interest can happen with stories or questions. Insight is birthed through reading the Bible or an appropriate book. We capitalize on conviction by explaining the gospel. We keep the conversation going, trusting the Holy Spirit to work, as we live life2life with people.

How about your friends? Where would you classify them: interested, needing insight, or under conviction? Evangelism needs to be measured by the mini-decisions people make towards embracing the Savior. Let’s keep the conversation going!