



There's a great scene at the end of the film, "The Big Kahuna" where Danny DeVito's character counsels a young co-worker about his overt mode of evangelism.

He says, "It doesn't matter whether you're selling Jesus or Buddha or civil rights or 'How to Make Money in Real Estate With No Money Down.' That doesn't make you a human being; it makes you a marketing rep. If you want to talk to somebody honestly, as a human being, ask him about his kids. Find out what his dreams are - just to find out, for no other reason. Because as soon as you lay your hands on a conversation to steer it, it's not a conversation anymore; it's a pitch. And you're not a human being; you're a marketing rep."

That scene sums up, for me, how the world sees the insincerity in our attempts to sell our faith the way a door-to-door salesman sells magazine subscriptions.

As a young college student, I was very passionate about Christian Apologetics. I read book after book dealing with how to "give to every man an answer, a reason for the hope that lies within" using science, history, archaeology, and logic to convince the skeptic and the unbeliever that Jesus really was the answer.

After several years of learning, and even teaching others, about the basics of the Christian Faith, I came to the realization that I had never once argued anyone into trusting Jesus. I had some great theological and mentally stimulating discussions with people, but the fact was that

my apologetics had not won a single person to Christ.

That's when I realized that the only Apologetic that really matters is the Apologetic of your life. No one can argue with your actual, personal experience with God. I realized that my life needed to reflect the transformational power of Jesus, or else my logic and wisdom and answers were useless.

Granted, I'm much wiser and more secure in the grounding of my faith now that I've spent so much time studying and discussing the issues with people. But what is best for others is that I begin to actually live out the Gospel in my daily life and share openly about my own struggles, failures, experiences and insights as I personally follow Jesus every day of my life.

When Peter exhorts the early disciples of Jesus to "...always be ready to give an answer, a reason for the hope that lies within.." it was written with the underlying assumption that the people he was writing to were living radically transformational lives within the culture they were part of. We know this because of what we see in the book of Acts and by looking at the first three hundred years of Church History. The early followers of Jesus were living lives that were extremely different from those of the pagan world around them. Because of this, Peter is encouraging these disciples to be ready to explain why they cared for lepers, and fed pagan widows, and shared personal belongings with anyone in need whenever unbelievers asked them the reason why.

These days I fear we in the Church have largely lost this sense of living a different sort of life from those around us. Instead, we're quick to offer answers to questions that no one is asking us.

In the closing words of the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus leaves us with what has become known as "The Great Commission". In it, Jesus charges his disciples with a set of tasks until he returns. Here's what Jesus commands us to do:

- 1) Go out into the world and make disciples.
- 2) Baptize these disciples in the name of the Trinity.
- 3) Teach them to obey everything Jesus commanded us.

If we take a moment to evaluate how we, the Church, have done in accomplishing these tasks, I

think we'll see where we've missed the mark, and hopefully where we need to get back on track.

First, we're called to go. It seems simple enough, but what frustrates me is how often I see us in the Church twisting this into a more comfortable format. For the most part, the organized Church has built a model of evangelism and discipleship that says, "Come to us". We build large buildings, we buy plasma television screens to announce our upcoming events, we host large-scale musicals and plays to dramatize the Gospel, and we instruct our members to invite their friends to Church so that the professional clergy can do the evangelizing.

I'm not trying to say that these methods are wrong or evil, but just that we've taken a very simple and clear command to "Go" and made it into a call for the lost to "Come to us". This isn't what Jesus commanded us to do. Jesus very easily could have commanded us to create inviting environments where the lost feel welcome. He could have commanded us to make space for unbelievers to show up and meet us on our terms, but he didn't. He commanded us that we should go out and, in the course of our everyday, regular life, communicate and live out the message of the Gospel among those we encounter everyday.

Secondly, Jesus commands us to make disciples. A disciple is someone who is daily, intentionally following Jesus with their whole life. A disciple is not a convert. If you take a look at how our local churches practice evangelism you'll probably see a lot emphasis placed on winning people to Christ, getting them to come forward in the meeting to make a public profession of faith, and not as much emphasis on taking them from this first step into all the other steps that follow.

As one example, I recently came across a very helpful tool called "The Engel's Scale" which charts the slow progression by degrees of those who are far from God and how they slowly come to faith in Christ over time and with the assistance of loving friends and the Holy Spirit.

What I found troubling about the scale was that it stopped at conversion. As if, after the conversion experience, we no longer had any need to chart their ongoing development and discipleship to Jesus.

Again, the entire emphasis was on conversion, not on discipleship.

I understand that there are exceptions to this in the Body of Christ, and for that I am very grateful. I'm simply pointing out that, at least as far as I have seen, most modern American Churches seem to focus entirely too much on conversion and not enough on discipleship, which is expressly what Jesus commanded us to focus on.

Thirdly, Jesus commands us in the Great Commission to "teach them to obey everything I have commanded". I find this part the most painful to explore. Simply put, I have never once encountered a church or a ministry where the main goal was to emphasize the commands of Jesus or to communicate a strong expectation of obedience for those who would call themselves disciples of Jesus.

If you want to know whether or not the Church has been obedient in the third section of The Great Commission, just ask yourself if you can name all of the commands of Jesus. If you don't know what all of these commands are, you not only cannot teach others to obey them, you yourself cannot obey them.

Jesus had an expectation that those who would follow him would...well...follow him. Obedience to Jesus was not an optional activity for disciples. Over and over again Jesus spoke about how those who love him obey his commands. His unwavering invitation was for disciples who would take his words seriously and put them into practice.

For the Gospel to become a living reality to those around us, it must become a living reality to those of us who have decided to make Jesus our Lord and Savior.

When asked what the greatest commandment was, Jesus responded by saying, "The greatest commandment is to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind...and the second is like the first; you should love your neighbor as yourself". (Matt 22:37-39)

Without embracing the Great Commandment, we can never hope to accomplish the Great Commission. This is why Paul the Apostle tells us that, without love, all that we strive to do for the Kingdom is meaningless and empty. (1 Cor 13)

We have to love people because they are people that Jesus loves. We have to learn to love people unconditionally. To love others as He loved us. Until we get really, really good at this, all our efforts to evangelize and to make disciples will appear hollow and empty.

BELIEVE, BELONG, BECOME

Someone once told me that every single human being has a desire to believe something, to become something and to belong to something. As we enter into relationship with others we need to listen for the clues to where people are at in this process.

Ask people questions about what they believe, find out what they are searching to belong to, help them to come to grips with what they want to become.

In some cases, the answers to these questions will be very practical. Some people want to become a nurse, or a mechanic. Others want to become significant or necessary. A few people we talk to will reveal that they want to belong to a family, or a discussion group, or that they are already identified with people who share their viewpoint. Until we engage people in real, honest relationship we'll never discover the answers to these questions, and we cannot help others find their own answers to these questions.

If nothing else, start your conversation with the person in front of you by saying, "You know, I was reading the other day about how everyone wants to believe, belong and become something. What do you think about that?" Let the Holy Spirit guide things from there and see where things go.

GARDNER VS WARRIOR MODES OF EVANGELISM

Another useful concept for me lately has been the understanding that there are two different styles of evangelism we can employ. As described in Spencer Burke's book, "Making Sense of Church", the two styles are "Warrior" and "Gardener".

The "Warrior" model is the predominant method that I have been trained in over the course of my Christian life. This model uses ideas like closing the deal, winning the lost, and targeting sinners, as if they were deer on the other end of our hunting rifle. Our mindset, in this model, is

squarely centered on results, and often we expect the result to come sooner rather than later. If we take a shot and miss, we simply move on to the next target and take a shot at another one.

Granted, this sort of evangelism style has been largely successful in bringing hundreds of thousands of people into faith in Christ over the years. Perhaps, again, our focus has been so centered on conversion that many have fallen through the cracks.

I think in today's culture this warrior form of evangelism is a dead-end. If anything, it does more damage to the Gospel than good, in my opinion. The reason why is that, honestly, we've gotten so good at blasting out the message that "Jesus Loves You" and "Jesus Died For Your Sins" that the world is tired of hearing it. What they want now is to see.

They want to see, with their eyes, if what we say is true, and they are looking at the lives of those who identify themselves as followers of Jesus to find the evidence.

The "Gardener" model of evangelism takes a much different approach. Like a farmer or a gardener plants, waters and protects the growing things in their care, they recognize that making the plant produce fruit is not their job. They recognize that they are simply cooperating with the natural process of growth inherent in the creation.

This does not mean that the gardener does nothing. Far from it. As anyone who has tended a garden knows, success depends on daily attention and care, but the bloom and the fruit will come in due time. These things cannot be forced or coerced. They must be allowed to occur in an organic and natural way.

To apply this to evangelism, it means trusting that God loves people more than we do. It means daily placing our attention on the lives and spiritual development of those whom we are in contact with. Our goal is to cooperate with the Holy Spirit as He urges us to love people into the Kingdom of God. This means we'll be invested in the lives of people for the long haul. We're not loving them because we want to push them into our way of thinking, we are loving them simply because God loves them and we are committed to love them in tangible ways to express the love of God to them every single day.

SOCIAL LEPROSY

In the book of John, Jesus prays for those who would follow his teachings after he ascended into heaven. What I find fascinating is that Jesus began by praying for what he didn't want to pray. Yeah, it sounds strange, doesn't it?

Why would anyone ever start praying by asking God for what they were not asking? Maybe the clue is in what it was that Jesus didn't pray. He says, "I pray not that you take them out of the world, but that you protect them from the Evil One" (John 17:15).

Why did Jesus pray this?

I think it's because he knows human nature and he knew that, soon after his ascension, we would want to remove ourselves from the world around us. We're not comfortable hanging out with those sinners. More often than not, we treat the lost, those outside the Church, as if they have some sort of "Social Leprosy". We're afraid we'll catch what they've got, so we avoid contact with them. We create Christian versions of the world so that we never have to interact with these "Social Lepers". We have Christian Radio Stations, Christian Yellow Pages, Christian Coffee Shops, Christian Book Stores, and all sorts of private avenues where our contact with non-Christians is minimized.

I'm convicted when I realize that Jesus didn't even treat people who had actual leprosy this way, and yet I treat those who think differently than I do as if they had some infectious disease that I might catch if I'm exposed to them for any extended period of time. The ironic thing is that Jesus expected that his disciples would be salt and light in the world, not hidden under a basket waiting for the second coming.

Paul the Apostle echoed the prayer of Jesus when he instructed the Christians in Corinth about their interactions with non-believers. "I have written you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people; not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters. In that case you would have to leave this world." (1 Corinthians 5:9-10)

Have we removed ourselves from the world? If so, we've allowed the Enemy to pacify us into complacency. It's time to awaken from our slumber and burst out of our Christian bubble.

SALVATION IS A PROCESS, NOT AN EVENT OR POINT IN TIME

One thing I find fascinating as I study the New Testament and the practice of the early church is that their concept of salvation was much different than mine. When I think of salvation, I usually think of that one day when, as a nine year old boy, I walked forward and prayed with my pastor to ask Jesus into my heart. However, Peter and Paul seemed to have a different opinion about the salvation process. In their minds, salvation was an ongoing experience, not a one-time deal.

"..And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved." (Acts 2:42-47)

"For you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls." (1 Peter 1:9)

When we begin to think of Salvation as a process, and not an event, it changes the way we think of Evangelism.

The early church fathers also had a great saying that has come to inspire my own faith. The statement was "Conversatio Morem!" which can mean either "Death To The Status Quo!" or "Constant Conversion!", depending on the context.

This phrase was indicative of the mindset held by the early church fathers that salvation, or conversion, was something every disciple needed to experience constantly, not just a one-time event or point in time.

THE FINISH LINE OR THE STARTING LINE?

In your own experience, what happens when someone you've been praying for and witnessing to finally accepts Christ as Lord and Savior? Don't you cheer and weep and give high-fives to all your Christian friends? Sure you do. That's an appropriate response. Even the Scriptures tell us that the angels in heaven celebrate when someone is saved.

(Luke 15:7-10)

However, our response and attention usually diminishes soon after this event. I believe it's because, for us, our work is done. Our friend has "made it". They are "in". They've crossed the finish line and we can all move on with our lives now.

But, if Salvation is a process, and not an event or a point in time, then our work is not done. Our friend has not come to the end of the journey. Instead, they have only just begun.

In other words, Salvation is not the finish line, it is the starting line. If we begin to think of Salvation in this way, as an ongoing, daily commitment to following the marvelous person of Jesus, it will have a radical effect on our methods of evangelism and the way we treat those we hope to lead into this way of life.

Keith Giles