

## PATHWAYS TO FAITH: REFLECTIONS ON CONGREGATIONAL EVANGELISM

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Some years ago, the missionary theologian Lesslie Newbigin wrote an article entitled, 'Evangelism in the Context of Secularisation'. In it, he reflected on the way in which unbelievers come to faith as follows:

All the statistical evidence goes to show that those within our secularized societies who are being drawn out of unbelief to faith in Christ say that they were drawn through the friendship of a local congregation.<sup>1</sup>

A statement like this takes us near to the centre of Newbigin's missionary thesis that it is the 'local congregation' that constitutes what he calls 'the hermeneutic of the gospel' – that is to say, it is the local congregation which is the incarnational interpreter of what the gospel of Jesus means. It is within the local congregation and by contact with its members that the good news of Jesus Christ is most clearly understood and apprehended by those who are not yet Christians.

A statement like this is easily passed over. It seems rather obvious at one level. Yet on closer reflection, I believe that these words provide some of the keys to effective ways of strategic thinking and action about evangelism in our churches today. Four observations from my own work as an evangelist would seem to illustrate different facets of it.

### **1. In planning our evangelistic programmes, we need to take more seriously the stories of people who describe the way in which they came to faith.**

I have come to the conclusion that we often act pragmatically on a *misreading* of the evidence about 'conversion'. It is easy to assume for example that people come to faith by some process of intellectual enquiry and discovery. The conversion process by this way of understanding is the end result of a critical enquiry and investigation in which certain logical steps of understanding and acceptance are built upon each other until the point is reached at which capitulation is inevitable and a person becomes a Christian. Doubtless there are those for whom this sort of process is true. But the majority seem to describe their conversion stories in somewhat different terms – not in ways which *exclude* intellectual categories, but in ways which are fundamentally *inclusive* of other categories as well.

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<sup>1</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, 'Evangelism in the Context of Secularization' (1990). Reprinted in *A Word in Season: Perspectives on Christian World Missions*, ed. E. Jackson (Grand Rapids/Edinburgh: Eerdmans/Saint Andrew Press), 1994, pp. 148-57, at 153.

Very few Christians who are new to the faith actually describe a process in which they reasoned their way to faith. On the other hand, what does seem to figure again and again in the testimonies of new Christians is the kind of language and reflection which arises from a wider relational process. The intellectual aspect is present, but is part and parcel of a wider inter-personal 'dialogue' in which the intuitions gained and insights obtained are as often subliminal as they are liable to conscious articulation. It is often within this process of what we might call 'relational dialogue and witness' that the real work of evangelism takes place.

What does this look like? Usually, the perceptions by which a person comes to faith are described in ways which suggest that it has been the overall impact of the lives of Christians (as coherent wholes) which have spoken more powerfully than simply words. The outsider has gradually come to see both the authenticity and integrity of a Christian outlook on life, evidenced by an individual or a group – or in many cases both. This process leads under God to the gradual desire for a change of outlook and perspective, in which the non-Christian begins to want to transfer allegiance and desire to live from the kind of spiritual perspective that has been seen modelled and incarnated in the life of Christian friends. Over a period of time this new outlook is taken in and adopted, so that it becomes part of the framework in which the new believer begins to act and think. But even at this juncture the 'adoption' of a Christian world-view (described here in terms which might imply a conscious moment in time) is usually described in terms which imply that the recognition of any sort of 'conversion' experience is more easily seen in retrospect than it is at any particular moment in time. This may seem rather clumsily put, but it catches the kind of language so often used. And, of course, it raises some very significant issues for evangelism.

In the first place, the way in which we gear our churches for evangelism often reflects an understanding of witness which is too exclusively cerebral and intellectual. We certainly need to 'persuade' people and get them to hear the message. But when we hear of people converted through an Alpha course for example, we may tend to put the emphasis upon the intellectual persuasion that must have gone on in the mind of the enquirer rather than on the inherent evangelistic value of the social context in which the course takes place – where the presence of believers and the creation of 'community' relationships over the length of the course provide key elements which are vital to the process of spiritual discovery and conversion in the life of the enquirer. It is often this 'relational dialogue' which counts as much as the actual words spoken. Thus, the effectiveness of the spoken word is rightly and inevitably set alongside the wider witness of the Christian community.

This in turn leads to a second implication. It is the obvious one that the process of evangelism that I have been describing takes time. The Billy

Graham organisation some years ago reckoned that most of those who responded at its crusades had been exposed to the life and witness of a Christian community for an average of 18 months before coming to a conscious response of faith. John Finney's more recent research in Britain amongst over 500 people from across the denominations who had come to conscious faith commitments during 1990-91 showed that the average time taken to get to this point was much longer. Finney concludes:

The gradual process is the way in which the majority of people discover God and the average time taken is about four years: *models of evangelism which can help people along the pathway are needed.*<sup>2</sup>

The research showed that where people had come to a sudden moment of conversion it was usually amongst those who were older.

This 'process' understanding of conversion (as contrasted with 'crisis' models) is not a new phenomenon in church thinking. Yet still many church programmes are structured and organised as if the way to 'do' evangelism is more influenced by the 'crisis' than by the 'process' model. It is reflected in strategies which revolve around the organisation of periodic guest services, with perhaps a mission once every three years, and the encouragement to get people to bring their friends along. What these events usually show is that whatever interest is shown by outsiders is nearly always embryonic and needs to be nurtured and fed. Based – as they often are – upon a *crisis* approach to conversion rather than a *process* one, most churches do not have the wherewithal to take people on from this point, and therefore the issue of evangelism tends to go onto the backburner until the next event comes along. Cycles of evangelistic strategy like this tend to confirm patterns of failure in evangelism which are difficult to get over. Where churches are wedded to a crisis approach to evangelism, and where such an approach evidently fails to work, congregations often experience disappointment and demotivation – and even resistance to the idea of evangelism when the next occasional foray into some specific evangelistic activity is suggested.

The whole process approach to evangelism – of which Alpha is one example – is more akin to the kind of model that we need to develop in different contexts. What is needed are more long-term and relational models in which word and life are bound up together. These could function at the level of activities designed for Christians to bring non-Christian friends to which need not necessarily involve any element of up-front proclamation. At one church I was involved with it was the first Saturday of the month Rambling Club which produced the relational context in which most outsiders found their way into more overtly church activities. For it was via this group that people made the Christian

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<sup>2</sup> John Finney, *Finding Faith Today: How Does it Happen?* (Swindon, 1992), p.25 (emphasis mine).

friendships which were the human stepping stones to something more overtly evangelistic. As Emery White puts it:

Effective Churches will create a context for (an) adoption process to take place in the lives of nonbelievers. The 'event' of coming into a personal relationship with Christ as Lord and Saviour is but the culmination of a spiritual pilgrimage as a 'seeker'.<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, where verbal proclamation is planned as an integral part of an evangelistic event, we need to think harder about providing opportunities which will enable enquirers to go further in terms of helping the process of exploration and dialogue which we have been describing. Too many of our evangelistic events are in effect one-offs which do not envisage this sort of follow-on process. They often arise out of an evangelism = reaping rather than an evangelism = sowing mentality.

The observations above may seem to imply that I am downgrading the importance of words and proclamation in evangelism. I do not mean to do so at all. I am fully committed to it. But I do mean to emphasise that we cannot think properly about the whole process of evangelism when we separate out the words and think they are the all-important parts which can function apart from the wider context of relationships and lives. Words and life are inextricably linked witnesses in the process of evangelism.

This connection is also of course profoundly biblical in its orientation. Whilst there is comparatively little in the New Testament about an encouragement to verbal evangelism, there is a great deal about an encouragement towards a growing Christ-likeness in the lives of believers – both corporately and individually. In this context it is significant that most of the opportunities for verbal evangelism in the New Testament seem to be expected to arise out of the witness of the daily lives of Christians, and that the nature of the words most usually used by Christians will come as a result of a desire on the part of the seeker to have answers to the questions that this different way of living raises.<sup>4</sup> 'I cannot hear what you say because of the way you live', is a rather too uncomfortable criticism of much Christian witness in our own day.

## **2. We are in danger of losing the art of friendship**

This second observation builds naturally from the first. For inevitably the kind of process evangelism which we have been describing depends on

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<sup>3</sup> Quoted in David Hilborn, *Picking Up the Pieces: Can Evangelicals Adapt to Contemporary Culture?* (London, 1997), p.175.

<sup>4</sup> E.g., 1 Peter 2:11-12, 3:15, Col. 4:6 etc. On the issues that this sort of observation raises, see Peter O'Brien, *Gospel and Mission in the Writings of Paul: An Exegetical and Theological Analysis* (Grand Rapids, Carlisle, 1995).

whether or not Christians can actually form and maintain real friendships outside the Christian circle.

It has become axiomatic to me as a visiting evangelist that those churches which will be most effective in reaching those outside their own circle with the gospel are those whose members have been able to make genuine and effective friendships within the local community, and who have then been giving themselves to pray for these friends. By contrast, those churches which will always struggle evangelistically are those which have not.

The actual statistics bear out this fact rather forcefully. Finney's research showed that amongst those coming to faith, nearly half said that the friendship of another Christian (or other Christians) was one of the most significant factors leading to conversion.<sup>5</sup> Alongside this should be placed the observation that new converts quite rapidly face the danger of losing contact with non-Christian friends.<sup>6</sup>

This could be explained by a number of different factors, but one of the most significant of these is that for the new Christian the available resources of leisure time will with increasing likelihood be taken up by church-connected activities. To an extent this is both natural and healthy. There is both a desire amongst new converts to spend time with newly found Christian friends, and also the appetite (and real need) to explore the Christian faith and to learn to grow and mature in Christian knowledge. But the downside of this evangelistically, is that church quite quickly becomes the centre of this new use of leisure time. Sundays and some weekday evenings begin to revolve around church activities, and with growing maturity in faith comes an ever-increasing range of opportunities for service and – in due course – responsibility within the church context. As leisure time is re-allocated, new Christians find that any left-over available time is spent catching up with other relational obligations, usually family ones. As priorities are thus reassigned, it is usually the case that the area of non-Christian friendships is the one that is neglected.

This sort of pattern is reproduced over and over again in churches up and down the country. What happens in effect can be put quite simply: the most likely source and mode of evangelistic effectiveness through friendships with non-Christians is that which most churches find it hardest

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<sup>5</sup> Finney, *op. cit.*, pp.43f.

<sup>6</sup> I was told a few years ago that research had been done which established that within two years of a profession of faith, a new Christian was likely to lose 75% of his or her non-Christian friendships. I have not been able to track down this research, but the findings would certainly be close to the reality observed in many church contexts.

to reproduce in practice. It takes a proactive strategy to counter this sort of trend, and, as such strategies are very seldom initiated or thought about, the painful truth is that the church's circle of evangelistic influence is progressively and effectively being reduced and marginalised.

But to move further with this challenge, what has been striking me more recently is that people actually need *help* in the art of making friends. I can well remember one of the first missions that I led with theological students. It was not a long event: just three days. We visited a team ministry with four churches, ranging in style from traditional Anglican through to what was really an Anglican house church. The team took part in around fifteen different events in different locations during the course of the weekend, from meetings in local pubs to a rather formal musical evening in a fifteenth century church building. I took about a dozen people with me, the majority of whom were training for the ordained ministry. During the week after the mission we sat down and talked through our experiences, sharing lessons learnt and challenges faced. I asked them each to say what was the most difficult thing that they had come up against during the weekend. The result was quite striking. I had expected problems along the lines of 'How do you begin to answer particularly difficult questions? What do you do when confronted with a pastoral situation which clearly needed more professional counselling? How do you begin to say something Christian in a secular environment?' and so on. In fact, the biggest problem faced by three quarters of the team was simply this. How do you begin to talk to someone you have never met before – about *anything*? The challenge we began to address with the team was therefore not so much to do with any specifics of apologetics and evangelism, but rather with the issue of inter-personal conversation: about how to take an interest in someone else and begin to talk to them at even the most simple level. It was really the issue of how to be human.

I am coming to believe, therefore, that one of the challenges facing our churches today is simply the question of how to help people to be human in their relationships with other people. And if what we are saying about evangelism through friendships is true, we need to be seriously addressing the issue of how to start and develop such friendships. For some the need is to discover (or rediscover) the motivating, empowering, and risk-taking love of God which leads us away from ourselves and our own concerns, and out towards other people; for many others it is the need at the level of the practical know-how through example, experience, advice, and apprenticeship.

This was confirmed for me recently. During some mission preparation meetings at two churches I focused amongst other things on this need for the nurturing of friendships outside the church circle. But instead of assuming that everyone would (a) instinctively know that this was needed, and therefore (b) re-double their efforts to make sure that it was

happening, I decided to acknowledge the difficulties in the deceptively simple business of making friends. What followed was akin to a corporate sigh of relief. At last we were addressing a very real – but often guilt-inducing – issue. From this point, the meeting took a very different, and quite unexpected course, but a very fruitful one. We began to discuss this whole area and the implications it had for the structures of church and personal life, and we spent some time sharing ideas and experiences at a very practical level, admitting failure, asking questions about time and priorities, reviewing church structures and expectations and ways of opening up friendships in the local neighbourhood, using homes, how to speak to a neighbour who had effectively been ignored for years, practical ways of praying, and so on.

Our contemporary society is one in which the basic nourishment of human relationships is under threat from many different directions. We have mentioned the pressures of time already, and how the church might – inadvertently perhaps – be becoming a partner in such pressures. But there are other major players. Perhaps some of the greatest threats are coming by courtesy of the digital revolution which brings with it enormous benefits, but enormous challenges. Rightly, the changes we are living through are being compared with the greatest revolutions in the past, and the implications for society are just as profound. What concerns me at this point is the relational impact of such changes. For the increasing drift of society towards more individualistic, introverted and passive forms of entertainment and socialising (nearly all fed by the latest technologies) is reaping its own harvest in the decline in human relationships.

At one level, such changes have been around for a while. On a recent mission, for example, a lady quite openly explained to me that nearly all the relationships which were real to her were those which she lived out through television soaps. In a quite literal sense, these characters were her friends. She knew them and loved them. Viewing figures for television soaps suggest that our addiction to such programmes represents something more than simply that they are good television. There are emotional attachments being made here which are sometimes pursued and valued because of their absence in real life.

But in addition, many of us are now being increasingly wedded to various forms of artificial and information media through which we are either forced, or tempted, to live out our daily lives. At work things get done through computers, modems, faxes, video-conferencing. At home we become addicted – in a parallel way – to personal computers, personal stereos, playstations, the television, and so on. The phrase ‘Virtual reality’ is more than simply a description of a digital realisation. For some, the reality which is thus digitally engendered is coming close to being the sum total of reality that there is.

In his book *The Road Ahead*, Bill Gates (the founder of Microsoft) who is reputedly the world's richest man and certainly one of its most influential, sets out his vision of a world completely harnessed by computer technology. He describes, for example, a period in his life when he was dating a woman who lived in a different city.

We spent a lot of time together on e-mail. And we figured out a way we could sort of go to the movies together. We'd find a film that was playing at about the same time in both our cities. We'd drive to our respective theaters, chatting on our cellular phones. We'd watch the movie, and on the way home we'd use our cellular phones again to discuss the show. In the future this sort of 'virtual dating' will be better because the movie watching could be combined with a videoconference.<sup>7</sup>

What he describes in the book is at one level a technological marvel – a world in which your house is programmed to do everything for you; from automatically turning on your favourite music when you enter the room, to bringing up your favourite picture on a giant screen. But at a far more important level it represents something quite different. As one writer put it in the preface to his review of Gates' book, 'Take a deep breath and a stiff drink before daring to enter Microsoft Bill's nightmarish vision of a technological future.'<sup>8</sup>

But this sort of thing is not that far off in certain spheres. A recent TV documentary introduced the prospect of the 'virtual reality' office, where people no longer need even to go to work, but can do everything through a computer screen from home. There is nothing it seems that can not be done for you. But there lies the problem. It even replaces human contact and relationships with silicone substitutes.

All this presents peculiar challenges in the area of human relationships – both now and in the near future, not least for the church. But – putting it positively – it also presents real possibilities. For even politicians are finding in the word 'community' the description of a reality which they know communicates to our contemporary society. Perhaps one of the main reasons for this is that it communicates to an awareness that any real sense of community seems to be slipping away. The increasing desire for expressions of human 'community' in our society means that our opportunities for creating real relationship bridges are all the greater.

All this takes us back therefore to the need to develop friendships and to be involved in the wider sense of community outside the church context. At a simple practical level, this is where the sort of community projects in which many Christians are involved are so important: school

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<sup>7</sup> Bill Gates, *The Road Ahead* (New York, 1995), p. 206.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted from a review in *The Ecologist* (July/August, 1997) in *R Briefing* 16 (1997).



PTAs, action for local issues, legal advice, and so on. These are not just means to an end of making friends. They are authentic expressions of what it means to live out the gospel in all areas of life. As we have seen, the very credibility of the message in the world's eyes is so often dependent upon such action and activity. But in the particular context of friendship, it is often those Christians who are involved in projects outside church territory who have least difficulty in bridging the friendship gap.

### **3. Ordinary church worship is an evangelistic opportunity**

Another facet of this idea that evangelism is essentially a relational process which involves dialogue is the observation that though we often focus all our attention as churches upon certain set-piece evangelistic events, it is very often meetings and events which are not specifically intended as evangelistic which are sometimes more significant in bringing outsiders to faith.

Judging from my own experience of church practice generally, the traditional approach tends to be some variation on a guest service strategy. Perhaps once every three months or so, the preacher (often a visiting evangelist) is invited in to preach with outsiders particularly in mind. Leaving aside the success or otherwise of such invitations in terms of numbers of real outsiders, I am interested in their evangelistic effectiveness at a communicational level.

To use the jargon, the form of communication being directed to the outsiders at such events is most definitely hot. They will understandably feel that everything has been put on just for them. The service is more than usually outsider- or seeker-friendly, so that, when it is done well, outsiders will feel welcomed rather than ostracised by what goes on. The hymns will be more generalised in address, picking up themes which are factual and third-person, rather than second person (e.g., 'I love you Lord...') where such language implies a relationship with God which does not as yet exist. The sermon then addresses the outsider. As a means of communication it is straight, and aims to persuade the mind and move the heart, and maybe even bring to the point of commitment.

I have no intrinsic problems with this, and have preached at hundreds of services like it. But the point I want to reflect on in this context is that for many new Christians, the route to faith came via the ordinary non-guest services. It was during the week-by-week ordinary church services that the gospel had been heard and assimilated and that the evangelising of the outsider had actually taken place.

My hunch is that the reasons for this are in line with the relational factors that we have been considering throughout this article. We could put it this way: in an ordinary church service, intended primarily for Christians, the outsider's question is not so much, 'How am I responding to all this overtly evangelistic stuff which is coming thick and fast at me?',

but 'What's in it for *them*? Why is it that these Christians seem to believe what they're singing about, and why is it that this Christianity thing seems to be meeting them at their points of need and helping them to live?' This, therefore, brings us back very much to the relational-dialogue mode of evangelism. It raises the issue of the truth and trustworthiness of the gospel not directly as a head-on intellectual encounter about which a decision must be made, but rather in a more tangential way by means of raising questions in the mind of the perceptive non-Christian outsider. But my point is that these questions are nonetheless evangelistic. 'Am I in the position of faith which is being demonstrated and heard here? How do I respond to this way of thinking? Does this Christianity help them to live, and might it not be in a position to help me?', and so on.

From an apologetic point of view, one could argue that the same thing is being communicated in both cases. But it is being communicated in rather different ways. In the one, it is predominantly via the sung, spoken, and preached Word aimed at the outsider, whilst in the other, it is via the worshipping community as it dwells in its own confession, drawing near to God, confessing its failings, responding to forgiveness, and feeding on God's Word for its teaching, benefit and further discipling. As a means of evangelism, both have their place. But where we often assume that it is the first approach which constitutes proper evangelism, it may be the second which is more productive evangelistically. In a cultural context in which no Christian background can any longer be assumed, and in which the process of evangelism will involve nearly always a lengthy dialogue between mutually exclusive views about the nature of reality, the second approach, tangential as it is, may have a lot to offer. It raises the worldview question without seeking some sort of immediate, crisis, personal response to what is being offered. Once again of course it is congregationally driven, for it lives and breathes by the testimony of the gospel incarnated in the lives of the worshipping Christian community.

It is not surprising that Finney's survey referred to earlier found that one of the most effective evangelistic questions is simply 'Please will you come to Church with me on Sunday?'<sup>9</sup>

#### **4. Churches usually under-equip their lay people for evangelistic opportunities at their place of work**

In beginning to explore this final reflection, it is appropriate to quote a second time from Lesslie Newbigin's article referred to at the start of this article. In commenting on the location of God's activity through his people in the world, he says: 'The primary action of the Church in the world is the action of its members in their daily work.'<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Finney, *op. cit.*, p.79.

<sup>10</sup> Newbigin, *op. cit.*, p.154.

In answer to the question, 'Where does the church operate?', the instinctive answer 'On Sundays at...' is revealed by this quotation as being rather badly flawed. Such a reductionist understanding is also – more importantly – very much less than properly biblical. Peter, for example, has no hesitation in his First Epistle in instructing the church in the same breath both about its nature and calling as God's people and about the location of that calling in the non-Christian world. After all it is here – 'living such good lives amongst the pagans'<sup>11</sup> – that most day-to-day opportunities for evangelism will actually take place.

This broader understanding of where the church properly functions as the Church is greatly needed today. Many biblical perceptions of the church and its calling are systematically deconstructed and curtailed by ways of thinking which are either geographically or functionally inadequate. And both misunderstandings arise out of an inadequate theology of the church as God's missionary people. As a result, many church evangelistic strategies seem to stop psychologically at the church porch. The assumption is either that congregational evangelism has to happen in church buildings, or that God's missionary people stop being his missionary people when they are not there.

Where, therefore, many evangelistic strategies fall short is in failing to help lay people in their witness at the work place. Here after all is the context in which many people develop significant and important friendships. Yet so often the idea of sharing the gospel in the work context is alien to most Christians' experience. This is not because they do not want it to happen. Far from it. It is rather because up-front evangelistic opportunities simply do not often arise in the normal course of business. Yet many Christians in the workplace are made to feel guilty because of a kind of evangelical expectation that this is the kind of evangelism which should be happening. This sort of pressure can force the issue of evangelism either into a kind of proclamation which becomes almost Martian in its inappropriateness, or else tends to force the whole issue of speaking about God at work onto the backburner.

I was recently talking to a Christian who had come to the point of feeling guilty that he did not match up to the sort of expectations in evangelism that his teaching from Church seemed to be laying upon him. He did not seem to encounter the conversational openings which he expected. No-one seemed on the surface to be remotely interested in talking about God or sin or salvation. As a result he was sensing failure as a witness, and carried around a de-motivating sense of guilt as a result.

In response to this type of experience it is of course appropriate to emphasise what we have been saying about relational dialogue. As in other areas of witness, it is the life of the Christian which will count in

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<sup>11</sup> 1 Pet. 2:11-12.

support of, or in contradicting, any specific words used. At this level the issues of respect for other people, personal loyalty, honesty, and the use of time will always figure prominently in the dialogue – even when no words are used.

But as far as words themselves are concerned, what I believe we need to work at more realistically in this whole area is the task of making connections between the gospel and the place of work. As the person mentioned above began to reflect on his experience, he began to discover that he *was* in fact getting opportunities for evangelism, but these were not arising in contexts where specifically religious subjects were being spoken of, but rather in conversations about ethical and moral issues which arose out of the concerns of the business itself.

I believe that work-related questions and issues like these will increasingly be the major entrance point for talking about faith at work. This is partly because we can no longer rely (could we ever?) on a residue of Christian consciousness to fuel day-to-day conversations upon more overtly religious themes. (In this respect, the expectations implied by some evangelistic training schemes that such conversations will be the norm strike me as being depressingly unrealistic.) We will often need to find ways of entry via other routes. But the other reason why such ethical and moral work-related issues become so important is that even in our radically secularised society, in which ‘religion’ has effectively been marginalised, many people are discovering that some sort of moral and ethical framework is still needed to handle life. Morality keeps slipping in via the back door just when some were saying that we did not need it any more. Significantly then, many of today’s very public political and social debates (in which people express their need for answers) are actually debates about right and wrong. They are moral debates.

How then do we begin to explore these connections? Such a process will most helpfully involve a two-way process of reflection in the light of experience. In the first place, ministers need to learn from lay people the points of contact between what they do at work and what they hear on Sunday which might helpfully inform the ways, for example, in which the Bible is taught from the pulpit and applied to the congregation. What tends to happen all too often is that the preached word on a Sunday simply fails to connect with the issues and realities of the wider world of Monday morning. Applications from the pulpit even tend towards serving and preserving a church culture by giving the impression that the gospel applies only to church matters (*e.g.*, the need for more commitment; the need to give; the need to service the various activities of the congregation through leadership and stewardship, and so on) rather than by making dynamic links with the world outside and its affairs. This is, of course, a denial of the very nature of the gospel itself, but we know all-too-well how easily this impression is created and sustained. Church by this route

too easily becomes a culture of its own – almost hermetically sealed – with its own mores and cultural norms.

Secondly, lay people might be encouraged to explore the biblical connections which arise from the issues which they engage with day-to-day. Sometimes this is most helpfully done by means of peer group meetings (maybe at the workplace itself) where the issues which arise at work might be identified and explored for the light which the Bible sheds on them.

A heightening of awareness and insight in this area of interface between work issues and gospel issues may lead us into more realistic and positive attitudes towards the kind of evangelism which is appropriate and possible in the workplace. Alongside the witness of life, it could usefully lead us to further reflection upon the kind of conversational evangelism so frequently demonstrated by Jesus in his encounters in the Gospels. It is often the case, for example, that his conversations arose out of quite secular and seemingly mundane concerns which are taken to the more spiritual level in the process of dialogue.<sup>12</sup> Jesus certainly knew how to start where people are. We too need to learn more about how to say something spiritual in the context of the seemingly mundane and worldly. Perhaps also, we need to learn more about the art – which Jesus demonstrates so tellingly – of raising the right kind of questions in our hearers' minds, as well as trying to supply answers.<sup>13</sup> It is often in this way that significant headway is made in evangelism – often through what we have been calling relational dialogue. Skills like these depend upon a process of reflection which involves a deeper awareness of how the good news that we bring relates to the concerns and issues which people face. They bring us back once more to the vital context of ongoing friendships, characterised by the love of God, in which such evangelistic dialogue finds its truest and most fruitful outworking.

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<sup>12</sup> *E.g.*, the sublime teaching of Jesus that he is the one through whom men and women will worship the Father 'in Spirit and in truth' begins with a request for a drink (John 4:7ff.); the provocative story about the Rich Fool begins with a legal wrangle about inheritance (Luke 12:13ff.), *etc.*

<sup>13</sup> *E.g.*, Mark 8:27, 29 (par.); 10:17ff. (par.); Matt. 12:10-11; John 6:5-6, *etc.*