



Shane L. Bishop

That's Good Mentis

How to Overcome
Your Fear and Evangelize



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THAT'S GOOD NEWS: HOW TO OVERCOME YOUR FEAR AND EVANGELIZE

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Introduction

*I am a traditional Christian . . .
but I am not in a bad mood about it.*



Evangelism is sharing the message of Jesus Christ under the influence of the Holy Spirit. Does this charge seem daunting? It doesn't have to be.

In fact, evangelism is so aligned with the will of God that it is hard to mess up, regardless of how badly you do it. I know lots of people who received Christ through hellfire, "in your face," propositional approaches to evangelism, but I have never met anyone who found Jesus through not having the Gospel shared with them at all. Let's face it, we all know evangelism is the "reproductive system" of Christianity; it is how people are invited to know Jesus. The more evangelism, the more Christians. We equally know that the very concept of evangelism intimidates more Christians every day. The less evangelism, the fewer Christians. This is problematic by any measure.

Why are we intimidated?

- Perhaps we have forgotten that the Gospel is good news.
- Perhaps we have lost clarity concerning our own beliefs.
- Perhaps we fear rejection and pushback.
- Perhaps we fear we will do more harm than good if we share our faith.
- Perhaps we have no idea how to share our faith.

Let me give it to you straight; we are called by God and empowered by the Holy Spirit to be effective evangelists for Christ. God is fully capable of

blessing and multiplying any witness we offer . . . no matter how messed up it may be.

Harold

I am convinced that the only way to get evangelism wrong is not to evangelize. An encounter early in my ministry taught me this lesson very well. I encountered Harold in the mid-1990s when I served as a United Methodist pastor in a small Illinois town, and Robert Schuller was one of the most famous television preachers in the country.

Harold was somewhere between eighty and 200 years old. He had killed people in World War II and then worked thirty years in a condom factory before retiring to a modest pension. These two life events misshaped his personality like an irregular pair of shoes eventually deform the feet. Harold was my neighbor. I walked by his yellow mobile home each day on my way to and from the parsonage of the Sumner United Methodist Church. I was warned about Harold: “He is a recalcitrant and curmudgeon, an old man who doesn’t like anybody but especially hates preachers.”

Harold sat outside his metallic front door on a small, wooden porch in good weather, and I cheerfully greeted him every morning and evening. He raised a hand but never spoke. This was our routine, and we did it every day. One day, he said, “I heard you like sweet tea.” It was the first time he had spoken to me. I replied, “That is not exactly right; I like fresh brewed, southern sweet tea where the sugar is melted in while the water is hot.” He said, “I can make tea like that. Stop by sometime.” I told him I would and walked on to work. (We had been at this for three years; I didn’t want to appear easy.) A couple of weeks later I paid Harold a call (preachers used to do such things), and he brought me a mason jar filled with better than average sweet tea. Once settled in, Harold talked about WWII. I had the strong feeling he had never spoken about these things to anyone before. We were on holy ground. He spoke of young men who didn’t return home; he called them by name. He described the face of a German sniper he had shot out of a tree and the horror of removing the soldier’s helmet as her blond hair flowed out. He described the circumstances resulting in two Purple Hearts and watching his own surgery being performed in the chandelier above him in a mansion turned field hospital.

Harold also spoke of how badly the church had hurt him as a young man. Upon returning from the war, he had impregnated his ultra-religious girlfriend; both of them were summarily ostracized by her family and by her congregation. He said, "We had nowhere to turn. It destroyed her life." He cried like a baby through most of it. And then something happened; he shut off the tears, said he didn't need me or my church, and I was curtly dismissed. I left a half glass of sweet tea on his table wondering what had just happened. After that our relationship returned to its previous state for a year or so, but I thought a lot about Harold.

One night, his wife Edna called me in the early morning hours in a panic: "I can't control Harold. He is having seizures, and the ambulance isn't here. Can you come and help me?" When I arrived, Harold was in the restroom with his eyes rolled back into his head, pants hanging at his ankles, and was urinating all over the place as he convulsed against the wall. I took a deep breath, waded in, and helped Edna. All the while Harold was crying out to God, "God, if you will let me live, I will give my life to you."

The ambulance finally arrived. The paramedics strapped Harold to a board and took off for Evansville. I went home and took a long, really, hot shower, threw my clothes in the washing machine, and went to bed. A couple of days later, I drove the hour and a half to Evansville and entered Harold's hospital room. He was in pretty bad shape, but that did not keep him from scowling and physically turning away from me. I sat down. We sat in silence for several minutes. When Harold determined that I wasn't going to leave, he whispered over the oxygen tank, "You heard me didn't you? I meant what I said about giving my life to God; but you won't be seeing me in your church. I am going to watch Robert Schuller on television." For some reason, that one really hacked me off, and I got about two inches from the tube up Harold's nose and whispered in his ear, "I have a great idea for you, Harold. The next time you are having seizures, can't control yourself in the toilet, and are about three-quarter's nuts, why don't you have Edna give Robert Schuller a call? See if he will get out of bed in California, fly to Sumner, and come over to your house in the middle of night. See if he will help your wife care for you and endure your unique physiological rendition of, "Showers of Blessing," all over his sweatshirt?" I slammed the hospital door behind me and left. It occurred to me this was possibly not a textbook example of pastoral care.

Harold was released the next week, and though he never said a single thing about our hospital conversation, he attended church the next Sunday and never missed another worship service at the Sumner United Methodist Church. He sat about midway back and to my right. Edna sat next to him beaming. Harold was alive and in church. Her prayers had been answered!

About a year later, I received another call from Edna. Harold was dead in his Lay-Z-Boy, and she wondered if I would stop by and sit with her until the county coroner arrived. There we sat in three chairs in the tiny living room: Edna, Harold, and me. Edna asked if I wanted a glass of tea. I said, "Sure." She handed me a glass and began to cry, "I don't exactly know what you said to Harold in the hospital room, but it changed his life. He found Jesus." A bit perplexed, I inquired, "Did Harold say anything at all about our conversation?" Edna replied, "Not really. He just said you were the first preacher who ever explained things to him in a way he could understand."

I did almost everything wrong. I certainly would not have made my pastoral care professors at Candler School of Theology proud. Apart from remaining conscious throughout the entire encounter, I doubt I did anything right at all. I did, however, learn something. God can work even through a hospital call that was a technical disaster. When it comes to evangelism, it appears that God can bless anything, except nothing.

This is a book about giving God something to bless.

Both Sides of the Bullhorn

I cut my evangelistic teeth doing street ministry with No Greater Love Ministries (NGL) long before I became a pastor. My father, Fred Bishop, founded NGL as a "Men's Evangelistic Ministry" in 1976. You might say evangelism is our "family business." Dad has taken thousands of men to high density and historically rowdy events like the street parties surrounding the New Orleans Mardi Gras, Indianapolis 500, and Kentucky Derby for over fifty years. The general idea is to provide training in faith-sharing techniques, wade into the middle of the scrum, boldly proclaim Christ, and then process what you experienced in small groups once you get back to camp. On these faith-sharing trips, men learn to share a testimony, street preach, do clown ministry, pass out Gospel tracts, and conduct a Jesus march. They are thrown into volatile situations "over their heads," and they must learn to rely on the

Holy Spirit to see them through. It is an evangelism boot camp. For NGL, street evangelism is the means by which the ends of spiritually equipping men for evangelism is powerfully accomplished. Through NGL, I learned that evangelism cuts both ways; it reaches both the evangelist and the one being evangelized. Street ministry may not be for everyone, but I have seen innumerable lives impacted on “both sides of the bullhorn” over the decades. On these evangelistic excursions, men are equipped with evangelistic skills they can take back home and implement in their own communities and churches.

Twice Back at You

On the streets, you are playing an away game where Satan always has home field advantage. It is here that immovable objects and irresistible forces collide in the spirit world. It is here that miracles occur. There will always be something raw, unfiltered, and honest for me about street evangelism. Evangelism in the context of street ministry is straight up spiritual warfare.

Growing up the son of a Bible smuggler, pastor, and evangelist, I have had the opportunity to meet many colorful folks. Few were more interesting than Phil. Phil is a deep Southern Illinois native and a painter by trade. He does prison and deliverance ministry and has led hundreds of people to Christ each year for decades. He is a soul-winning machine. Phil’s life is dedicated to speaking words of healing, deliverance, or salvation. It is literally all he talks about.

One year, on the Mardi Gras trip, a practitioner of voodoo locked in on Phil just outside Jackson Square in New Orleans. He was a filthy, diminutive, and wiry guy with dreadlocks who had nothing on but dirty shorts and some kind of feather thing on his head. His body and face were all tatted up with various and sundry devil stuff. He had nothing in his hand but a piece of sidewalk chalk. Something about Phil drove this guy even more crazy than he already was, and he began to stalk Phil. He finally approached and drew a chalk circle around Phil, began to speak unintelligible hexes, delivered dark curses, and literally danced around the circle. All the while Phil stood motionless, completely unintimidated, smiling slightly, and watching with sheer amusement. When the incantation was complete, the witch doctor defiantly locked eyes with Phil, probably expecting him to die on the spot.

Phil didn't die. In fact, he didn't even blink. Still locked in a stare down, Phil spoke but four words in a Southern Illinois drawl, "Twice back at you." The little voodoo man looked as if a knife had been driven into his soul. He contorted, screamed violently, and disappeared into the crowd at a full sprint.

Final Score:

Phil: 1

Voodoo Man: 0

Evangelism for *Regular* People

If you are thinking that street evangelism doesn't seem cut out for regular people, you are probably right. Perhaps the very idea of this kind of evangelism is what intimidates so many Christians. Let's face it; taking people on a mission work trip is a far easier sell than sharing faith with the hostile hoards. For the past four decades, evangelism has been a major part of my pastoral ministry, and unlike my early years, the vast majority has been conducted in the crucible of the local church. My evangelistic efforts these days primarily center upon all-church outreaches and equipping regular people to share faith with their family, friends, co workers, and neighbors. Such evangelistic techniques are neither forced nor manufactured, but they do take planning and intentionality. I will share the most effective of these methods with you in the chapters to come. We will also discuss some methods of doing all-church evangelism. There may not be as many exciting stories with this kind of evangelism, but the majority of the people I have seen come to Jesus and follow him into discipleship have done so in the context of the local church.

Street ministry is propositional evangelism aimed at reaching strangers in a one-time encounter. It is an away game. You will never see these people again. You can go right at it. When people respond, you hope they connect to a local church when they get home.

Church ministry is relational evangelism aimed at reaching people you know in the context of community. It is a home game. These are your family, friends, and neighbors. It requires a softer touch. When people respond, a church is awaiting them with open arms.

Both propositional and relational evangelism are needed. For our purposes, we will focus upon the latter. In this book, I hope to challenge the way we think about evangelism, help you overcome the intimidation factor, and widen our collective imaginations as to how regular people can effectively reach others for Jesus.

Hellfire and Salvation

Jesus called Peter and Andrew to be “fishers of men,” and that calling is extended to all who answer Christ’s call to become disciples of Jesus. Many of the twelve disciples were commercial fishermen on the Sea of Galilee. They caught fish or they starved. If you couldn’t catch fish in one place, you went to another. If you couldn’t catch fish with one technique, you shifted to another. There were no excuses. It was that simple. This “get it done gear” was the mentality Jesus was looking for in his inner core. It is a mentality he is still looking for today. We don’t need to rethink what it means to be a “people fisher” but we need to constantly be evaluating our methods of attracting the fish.

Most Christians I knew as a child were products of a Christian home. They received Christ at a young age, were baptized, and were reared in the nurture of the church. How was a profession of faith achieved so soon? Hellfire and salvation.

I was saved when I was seven. We were holding a revival at Oak Wood Baptist Church in Ft. Worth, Texas, and I walked down the aisle during the invitation, somewhere between the fortieth and forty-first verse of “Just as I Am.” At that altar, I repented of my dastardly ways, prayed to receive Christ, and was summarily baptized. It is a time I remember most warmly, as I truly felt God reaching to me. I responded to the best of my childhood ability. I am so glad my parents encouraged me. You can say what you want about childhood conversions, but there is no doubt in my mind that I was saved when I was seven.

A couple of years later, I was just beginning my Sunday school career at the Oak Grove Baptist Church north of Pinckneyville, Illinois. We often participated in a corporate exercise called “When, Where, and Why.” The idea was simple; all the elementary-school aged kids got into a circle, and when our

turn came around, we were to answer the following three questions: When did you receive Jesus? Where were you when you received Jesus? Why did you receive Jesus? The When responses were all recent, after all we were just kids and no one had been a Christian for very long. The Where responses varied, but for the most part they happened at church, home, or at camp. However, the Why was always exactly the same. Every Baptist kid I knew in the early 1970s got saved because he or she didn't want to go to hell. Let me tell you right now, no one wanted to go to hell.

When I was growing up, hell received a lot of attention in church. In addition to sermons about hell, there were Sunday school lessons about hell, songs about hell, and movies about hell. The scariest movie of them all, *The Burning Hell*, was released in 1974 and starred a horn-rimmed Baptist preacher from Mississippi named Estus W. Pirkle. While it didn't win any Oscars, it was plenty horrifying to pre teens from the Hooterville/Pixley Circuit, and if you had some hell in you during the opening scene, it was scared out of you by the final credits.

If such means were crude evangelism tools, they were certainly effective. Did I mention that I got saved when I was seven years old? I also got saved when I was eight, nine, nine and a half, ten, twelve, and twice when I was thirteen.

I have thought about all of this over the years, and here is my conclusion: I am grateful that people shared Jesus with me.

I once heard a street preacher shout to a crowd, "Get your life insurance here!" That was the old bait. We were headed to hell and, by receiving Christ into our lives, our eternal address would now be heaven. Since life is uncertain, the sooner you make the move, the better! Such evangelistic techniques were highly effective but were predicated upon shared assumptions about the afterlife from a Christian perspective. To say such assumptions are not as widely held in our post-Christian culture as they were when I was a child would be an understatement. These basic assumptions are not even held in many churches today.

We don't need to compromise our message of eternal salvation made possible by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The message is alive and well. We don't need to stop sharing our faith. The Great Commission hasn't changed, and the Holy Spirit is still empowering witnesses on one hand and drawing unbelievers toward Jesus on the other. Our evangelistic task today

is to hold fast to our message of the forgiveness of sin and eternal salvation through faith in Christ but be creative with how we communicate that message. Churches who are flexible with their message and inflexible with their methods are on the endangered species list if they are not extinct already. Churches who are inflexible on theology but creative with methodology will have a future and a hope.

Switching Methodology

I am not a good or patient fisherman (the two are interrelated). Every time I have a reel in my hands, I suspect this is the day all the fish on the planet have finally figured things out. This is the point when I usually go home, but bailing on the day doesn't even cross the mind of real anglers. Have you ever gone fishing with an experienced bass fisherman in a boat? The tackle box is filled with different lures, all demanding a different technique for maximum effectiveness. Unlike bad fishermen, these people don't sit all day in one spot, baking in UV rays and futility; they keep switching lures and keep moving until they find somewhere the fish are biting. If that doesn't work, they try it all over again the next day. What if we changed our evangelistic methodology?

Old MethodhAvoid eternal hell.

New MethodhReceive a life filled with peace, purpose, power, and passion.

- What if personal conversion was touted as a completely different way to live than the template offered by this world?
- What if the prospect of becoming a disciple of Christ was presented as edgy, risky, and thoroughly countercultural?
- What if we presented Christian discipleship as a life brimming with peace, power, passion, and purpose that is so all-consuming that physical death isn't even a speed bump?

If we can affect a bait change, might we then proclaim that, in Christ, we can embrace a life filled with faith, hope, and love, a life where we trade despair for hope, confusion for clarity, and meaninglessness for purpose?

Life in Christ is the greatest trade of all time!

Ready for the bonus? This life isn't just for now. It is forever!

Reclaiming the Good News

Mainstream western culture deems orthodox Christians as haters, evangelism of any kind as hostile, and the words of Jesus, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me,” (John 14:6 NIV),” as exclusive. They have not only rejected the terms of discipleship but have vilified them. Rather than push back on the false narrative, many Christians have capitulated entirely. This quickly relegates expressions of faith to safe spaces like church, assuming your church is a safe place. It should not be surprising that many tentative believers have withdrawn their Christian witness from the public square altogether for fear of cultural pushback. They don’t initially change what they believe but are frightened into internalizing faith and witness. Because of this, faith begins to atrophy and will eventually die. The justification for this is “do no harm,” which has become more central in the belief system of many tepid Christians than the Bible itself. The reality is that, by our capitulation, we allow the demonic agenda of Satan to be shoved down the throats of our family, friends, and neighbors. And we allow it without offering those who are looking for another path an opportunity to hear the Good News of Christ. More people are ready to hear a compelling Gospel message than there are Christians willing to proclaim it. God forbid that our collective witness be silenced for fear of setting someone off on social media, getting a bit of pushback at work, or losing friends (who are happy to share their thoughts but want no part of yours).

The Abdication of Evangelism (for Any Reason) Is Not a Christian Option

I believe you can be a consistent and effective witness in a culture that desperately needs Christ on one hand and is increasingly hostile to Christianity on the other. It won’t be easy, but it can be done. The whole of Christianity is an upstream walk against the current of this fallen world.

Are you ready to push against the current?

I am!