

CHAPTER 1

You Can Tell Others about Jesus

Met David, a deacon in First Community Church. David became a Christian in college when he met two Christians taking a spiritual survey on the campus green. He grew quickly, absorbing everything he was taught and excitedly telling his classmates about Jesus Christ. He took part in dorm outreach events and saw others put their faith in Christ. But now, twenty years later, things have changed. David's faith has slowed down even while his life has sped up. Work, family, and church responsibilities consume all his time and energy. David rarely shares with anyone in the large company where he works. He can't remember the last time he shared his faith. Even though he is surrounded by non-Christians at work, David can't seem to recapture the boldness he had in college. And when Pastor Bob speaks of telling others about Jesus, David feels guilty but helpless. The only way he knows to rationalize this guilt is by telling himself that he's just not an evangelist. That explanation makes him feel a little better.

Meet Nichole, a college sophomore. Nichole became a Christian in David's church when she was a child. In her teen years, she attended a church-wide evangelism-training program. As suggested by the program, she prayed for one other teen to come to faith through her that year. She never saw that prayer answered and, as a result, grew discouraged about

sharing her faith. Between this discouragement and her intellectual questioning, her faith faltered. Now in college, she has begun meeting with other earnest Christians. Her questions have been answered, and she has grown excited again about sharing her faith. But Nichole finds it difficult to relate to non-Christians. The evangelism techniques she is being taught feel forced. Any attempt to write her testimony seems like a complete flop because she received Christ when she was five. No other college student can relate to her background. Frustrated, she finds herself wondering if she will ever learn to share her faith with others.

Meet Pastor Bob, the shepherd of David's and Nichole's church. When Bob became a Christian in his twenties, Jesus completely changed his life. At first, he told everyone he met about Jesus. A few in his family also professed Christ, although most mocked his new faith. But Bob was serious about this new life. He sold his house and began attending seminary. Now a church leader, he finds few chances to witness except in his official role as a pastor. Between preparing sermons, counseling, and leading meetings, he rarely takes time to interact with non-Christians. Looking over his congregation, he realizes how few of his people share their faith during the week. These are good people who love Jesus Christ and sincerely desire to tell others about him. But they don't know how. Many times he's preached sermons on being a bold witness, but he's seen few results. He knows his congregation needs more. But what? Besides, Pastor Bob has a hard time asking his people to do something he's not doing.

Three people. Different lives, but one problem. When it comes to sharing their faith, they all feel tongue-tied.

Hope for the Tongue-Tied

Because you are reading this book, I can already tell we have three things in common. First, you desire that our Lord use you in spreading the good news of salvation. Second, when it comes to sharing your faith, you feel tongue-tied, inept, and awkward. Third, in spite of this awkwardness, you still desire to grow in sharing your faith.

We know that there is great joy and excitement in proclaiming the salvation that Christ freely offers. There is even greater joy in watching and helping a new Christian be born. We are right to long after this privilege. Paul wanted Philemon to proclaim his faith. "I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith, so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ" (Philemon 6). As this

verse demonstrates, there is a connection between witnessing and a healthy Christian life. Paul Little has said, “Witnessing is one of the keys to spiritual health. I like to call it the fizz in the Pepsi of the Christian life, because it puts sparkle and verve into our faith.”¹

The witnessing Christian is a healthy Christian. Evangelism is a means of God’s grace to *our* souls. When we share our faith, we are focused on things that really matter—the growth of God’s kingdom and a person’s eternal destiny. As we talk with unbelievers and learn of their problems, it helps put our own problems in perspective. A witnessing Christian will also spend less time bickering and fighting other Christians. Joe Aldrich observes:

Many in the church are like caged hunting dogs. With no birds to hunt, they spend their time nipping, scrapping, and fighting each other. Turned loose to fulfill their destiny, to pursue their quarry, to fulfill their great commission, they stop biting and fighting.²

However, we face formidable barriers when trying to proclaim Christ. We live in a secular time when many people think that religious things are best left in church. Organized religion is seen as quaint and irrelevant to the needs and problems of everyday life. We experience daily the fact that “no one seeks God” (Romans 3:11). Few bring up spiritual things unprompted.

Can You Identify?

In addition to this secularization, we are well aware of our own inadequacies. If we do try to share our faith, we don’t know where to begin. Our palms start to sweat, our mouths become dry, and our minds turn to mush. In a word, we become *tongue-tied*, that is, “deprived of speech or power of distinct articulation; made speechless, silent, unable to speak freely.”³

That definition aptly described me until I began to understand the principles presented in the following pages. This book has grown out of my own struggles, victories, and setbacks and is written as an encouragement to others who have the same verbal struggles.

Most gifted evangelists have had a dramatic adult conversion. They also seem naturally skilled in dealing with people and know exactly what to say and when to say it.

I, on the other hand, don't have a dramatic testimony. I grew up in a Christian home and accepted the Lord when I was around eight years old. I was not saved dramatically as an adult from drugs or alcohol or some other worldly bondage. Actually, I find it difficult to relate to the inner emptiness that some experienced before they came to Christ as an adult.

In addition, I'm not naturally an extrovert or a gifted conversationalist. I have to think about what I am going to say ahead of time. When I began dating the woman I soon would marry, I would write down topics to talk about or questions to ask her so the conversation wouldn't lag.

Furthermore, I don't think well on my feet. When placed in a conflict, I'm usually on the receiving end of the barbed comments and can never think of a snappy retort—until two hours later. Then I know exactly what I should have said!

Are any of these characteristics true of you? Have you desired to share your faith but felt inadequate because you don't have a dramatic conversion story or because you are not naturally an extrovert? The gap between what we perceive gifted evangelists to be and the way God has made us can be discouraging. The call to evangelize can seem like an impossible command. When we listen to the stories of gifted evangelists, it is easy to be filled with guilt and despair.

Current Evangelistic Helps

If we survey the current evangelistic helps, we find that most fall into one of two categories. On the one hand, there are excellent books written by gifted evangelists. These books inspire us with their stories and instruct us with their principles. But often our own experience falls far short of the stories described. If they relay a story of sharing the gospel on an airplane, then we try something similar and fail miserably. So we give up, concluding that we are not gifted evangelists and that the Lord will never use us to share our faith.

On the other hand, we have evangelistic helps that consist of structured programs. These programs usually involve a script to memorize and a structured time and place to witness, such as the home of a recent church visitor. These programs have been helpful in aiding many of us who are tongue-tied. Without these programs we would not know how to share our faith at all. However, because these programs are so struc-

tured, we often are still not equipped to share our faith at other times. While officially “witnessing” we are an effective bearer of the good news. But in the day-to-day, we have difficulty sharing the gospel with friends and co-workers.

Yet even with these resources, less than half of Christians have shared their faith with anyone in the past twelve months. No wonder North American church growth is stagnant. But the good news of this book is that by understanding and practicing a few simple principles, you can enjoy a lifetime of sharing your faith.

I don’t know whether God will give you the privilege of leading someone to Christ. But if you will follow the principles presented in these chapters, I do know he will give you the privilege of speaking about him. If you came to Christ as a child or don’t have a dramatic conversion story, then this book will be of help to you. If you are not a gifted communicator, then these principles will aid you.

The Need for All to Share

The need for all of us to share our faith has never been greater. More than half the people who have ever lived in human history are alive today. Stated another way, the total number of people who have been alive from creation until today is less than the number of beating hearts at this very second. There are simply not enough evangelists, pastors, and missionaries to reach everyone with a clear presentation of the gospel. For some people, the closest they will ever come to the gospel is you.

Not only is the need great in terms of numbers, but the stakes that hang in the balance are great as well. C. S. Lewis states it this way:

It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you can talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror or corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to one or other of these possible destinations. . . . There are no *ordinary* people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations—these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit—immortal horrors or everlasting splendours.⁴

So how can we who are tongue-tied Christians become more effective at sharing our faith? Is there really hope that an ordinary Christian can grow in this area? Yes, yes, a thousand times yes! Before proceeding, though, let's clear our minds of some myths.

Myth 1—Professional Evangelists Are Most Effective

The first myth to dispel is that most people come to the Lord through well-known evangelists. When someone mentions effective evangelists, we think of Billy Graham or Luis Palau. But most people who come to the Lord as teenagers and adults come through the witness and encouragement of a friend. Actually, to your friends, you are the most effective evangelist they can have. A survey from the Institute of American Church Growth found that 75 to 90 percent of those who come to faith do so through a friend or acquaintance who explains the gospel to them one-to-one. This is the method God blesses!

Take an informal survey in your own church. Who has become a Christian as an adult? How did those people first come in contact with the gospel? What did it take for them to give themselves to Christ? You will find that most people come to the Lord through friends, relatives, and relationships at a local level. God has designed evangelism to work this way.

Myth 2—We Must Win Them to Christ

The second myth to reject is that we have not been successful if the person does not receive Christ. Converting the human heart is the Holy Spirit's job. Our job is to proclaim the message clearly and winsomely. If we have been able to proclaim Christ, we have been victorious. J. I. Packer succinctly states it this way, "While we must always remember that it is our responsibility to proclaim salvation, we must never forget that it is God who saves."⁵

Unfortunately, some have put all the responsibility for conversion of the human heart upon us. In addition, we are trained by hearing all the "success" stories. In the process, we overlook the sowing that must happen first. Jesus said that the farmer went out to sow the word (Mark 4:14). Our responsibility is to sow the word. But many of the resources don't teach us to sow, they teach us to harvest. In that same parable, we notice that the reaction to the gospel does not depend on the sower; it depends on the nature of the soil. Our job is to sow the word gener-

ously. We must let God determine the reactions. He promises some will reject it, some will receive it with joy and fall away, but still others will receive the message and produce great fruit. This knowledge can help us relax and concentrate on our responsibility. Michael Horton reminds us:

We know that, in the final analysis, only God's electing, redeeming grace, and not Madison Avenue or the latest fads of pop psychology, will bring lasting reconciliation between humans and God. With this knowledge we can be more comfortable with the biblical message and biblical methods. We can approach unbelievers as human beings rather than targets, consumers, numbers and converts.⁶

Every time we sow the word and engage an unbeliever in thinking about eternal things, we have been victorious.

Myth 3—Evangelism Cannot Be Learned

The third myth to destroy is that because we are not gifted as an evangelist, we cannot learn anything about evangelism. Stated another way, we often believe that evangelism is something you either have or you don't have. But that simply is not true. Just because I am not talented enough to play professional football does not mean I cannot play a pick-up game with my friends or my children.

Evangelism is a skill. Evangelism can be broken down into different skills to be learned and mastered. Anyone who has ever participated in a sport can understand the process. When I watch Olympic gymnasts compete, I am dumbfounded. As an outsider to gymnastics, I have no idea how the athletes develop the ability to perform these moves. But I have played basketball. So when I watch a basketball game, I know that the athlete's fluid play is the result of mastering many different skills. Whether at the YMCA or in the NBA, every basketball player works on skills like dribbling, passing, shooting, and rebounding. What looks mysterious to the outsider is really the result of mastering many individual skills.

Evangelism is similar. When put together by a gifted evangelist, the skills needed are confusing and overwhelming to the rest of us. But if we will break the skills down into learnable pieces and grow in

each area, then we will be well on the way to sharing our faith. These skills will not be mastered overnight. But if we persevere in developing our abilities little by little, we can and will see progress.

The Four Steps to Presenting the Gospel

There really are just four different steps to becoming more proficient in presenting the gospel. We will be looking at these skills in the following chapters.

- Step 1 is *praying biblical prayers* from Colossians 4:2–6. This will be covered in chapter 2.
- Step 2 is *building genuine relationships with unbelievers*. Chapters 3 and 4 will guide you to build relationships with unbelievers that can lead to the gospel.
- Step 3 is *transitioning the conversation to spiritual things* when God opens the door. Chapters 5, 6, and 7 will train you in bringing the gospel into your situation. Handling a few responses is covered in chapter 8.
- Step 4 is *using God-blessed resources* that will aid you in proclaiming the gospel. Suggestions are made for these in chapter 9.

Once broken down, these steps are really quite simple. If I can learn them, then so can you.

Moses, Our Encouragement

After Moses met God in the burning bush, God gave him the assignment of bringing his people out of bondage. But Moses argued with the Lord.

Moses said to the Lord, “O Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor since you have spoken to your servant. I am slow of speech and tongue.” The Lord said to him, “Who gave man his mouth? Who makes him deaf or dumb? Who gives him sight or makes him blind? Is it not I, the Lord? Now go, *I will help you speak and will teach you what to say.*” (Exodus 4:10–12)

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The Lord has given us an assignment as well. We are to speak about our Lord, knowing that he will use us to lead men and women out of the bondage of sin. In the past, we have not gone because we are slow of speech and tongue. But who made you the way you are? Is it not the Lord? In spite of your slowness of speech, he promises to help you speak and to teach you what to say. With that promise in mind, are you ready to obey his command? If so, then turn the page and let's begin!