

CHAPTER 1

Our Evangelistic Reality

If you are reading this and you are a follower of Jesus, the single reason you are a Christian is because someone *evangelized* you. Regardless of whether you grew up in a Christian home or came to faith later in life, someone shared the message of the gospel with you.

Maybe it happened when you were a little kid, as one of your parents tucked you into bed. Or maybe it was a friend in high school who had the guts to talk to you about Jesus. Maybe it hit you on a college campus where you were trying to figure out life. Someone showed up and shared the truth of the gospel, and you responded. Maybe you picked up a Gideon Bible in a hotel room on a business trip, desperate for answers. And let's be real—it might have been a YouTube video that grabbed your attention. But here's the point—someone took the time to make sure you had a chance to hear about Jesus.

But here's the troubling fact: Fewer people than ever before are sharing their faith!

In his essay “It’s Getting Harder to Talk About God”, Jonathan Merritt hired a research firm to conduct a survey of 1,000 people to determine how often they had spiritual or religious conversations. In it he wrote:

More than one-fifth of respondents admit they have not had a spiritual conversation at all in the past year. Six in 10 say they had a spiritual conversation only on rare occasions — either “once or twice” (29 percent) or “several times” (29 percent) in the past year. A paltry 7 percent of Americans say they talk about spiritual matters regularly.¹

And of the spiritual conversations that do take place, they only mention Jesus 50 percent of the time and reference the Bible only 37 percent of the time.² Which begs the question, if these “spiritual conversations” don’t include either of those things—what exactly do they include?

Another shocking set of stats revealed that nearly half of millennial Christians (47 percent) think that sharing their faith with someone who holds a different belief system is wrong.³ Yes, you heard that right. Almost 50 percent of the next generation of Christians believe that telling someone about Jesus who doesn’t already believe in Him is somehow morally wrong. And if you think it’s just a millennial problem, think again—the numbers for older generations aren’t much better!

1 Jonathan Merritt, “It’s Getting Harder to Talk About God”, New York Times, Oct 13, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/13/opinion/sunday/talk-god-spirituality-christian.html>.

2 Everts, Don. *The Reluctant Witness*. IVP, 2019. Chapter 1: Reluctant conversationalists, Figure 1.2.

3 “Almost Half of Practicing Christian Millennials Say Evangelism Is Wrong”, Barna Research, Feb 5, 2019, <https://www.barna.com/research/millennials-oppose-evangelism/>.

And here's the kicker—even when we are having “spiritual conversations”, most of those are happening with people who already believe what we believe.⁴ 80 percent of church-attending Christians believe they have the personal responsibility to share their faith, but 61 percent admit to not having done so in the last six months.⁵ This matches up with the findings of another report which showed that 60 percent of non-Christians say their Christian friends rarely talk about their faith.⁶

We all came to faith because someone had the guts to share the gospel with us, but too many Christians today are keeping their mouths shut. Survey after survey shows that evangelism in the church is in a steep decline, while the need for it in our world is skyrocketing.

Christianity has long been the largest religious group in North America, but it is now on the decline. In fact, those who claim to have “no religious affiliation” (referred to as “Nones”) are now as great, or greater, in number as those who identify as Protestant Christians.⁷

4 Jesus Film Project, “We Asked 1600+ Christians Why They Didn’t Share Their Faith”, [Jesusfilm.org](https://www.jesusfilm.org/blog/christian-evangelism-statistics/), July 23, 2020, <https://www.jesusfilm.org/blog/christian-evangelism-statistics/>.

5 Lifeway Research, “Churchgoers Believe in Sharing Faith, Most Never Do”, [lifeway.com](https://research.lifeway.com/2012/08/13/churchgoers-believe-in-sharing-faith-most-never-do/), August 13 2012, <https://research.lifeway.com/2012/08/13/churchgoers-believe-in-sharing-faith-most-never-do/>.

6 Aaron Earls, “Most Open to Spiritual Conversations, Few Christians Speaking”, [Research.Lifeway.com](https://research.lifeway.com/2022/02/22/most-open-to-spiritual-conversations-few-christians-speaking/), Feb 22, 2022, <https://research.lifeway.com/2022/02/22/most-open-to-spiritual-conversations-few-christians-speaking/>

7 Jack Jenkins, “Nones’ Now as Big as Evangelicals, Catholics in the US”, [Religionnews.com](https://religionnews.com/2019/03/21/nones-now-as-big-as-evangelicals-catholics-in-the-us/), March 21, 2019, <https://religionnews.com/2019/03/21/nones-now-as-big-as-evangelicals-catholics-in-the-us/>

Boomers (1946–64)	26% Non's / 42% Protestant
Gen X (1965–76)	35% Non's / 33% Protestant
Millennials (1981–96)	44% Non's / 26% Protestant
Gen Z (1996–2012)	48% Non's / 20% Protestant ⁸

It's a mess out there—people are disillusioned by the behaviour of public Christian figures who have fallen hard, and suspicious of authority in general. Then there's the political baggage people now associate with Christianity, the sex abuse scandals that have rocked the church, and even demographic shifts like the declining birth rate among Christians. And many kids growing up in the church are not equipped to handle the tough arguments against Christianity that they get hit with the moment they step outside of the church doors. Add to that the fact that we live in a culture where it's totally normal to mix and match different beliefs ... the list keeps going.

But there's one reason that we just can't ignore: We're simply not talking about our faith. We're not sharing the good news of Jesus with the people around us. And if we're silent, how can we expect things to change?

As I have taught on evangelism in classes and at conferences, I will often ask everyone in the room who identifies as a Christian to stand up. I will then ask, "If you grew up in a Christian home—please sit down." The room will usually then be filled with the sound of people sitting back down in their chairs.

I will then follow up with a second question: "If you came to faith at a youth group event or a camp—please sit down." On many occasions, this second question will result

⁸ Ryan P. Burge, "Gen Z and Religion in 2022", Religion in Public, April 3, 2023, <https://religioninpublic.blog/2023/04/03/gen-z-and-religion-in-2022/>

in everyone in the room sitting, meaning that everyone who was present had come to faith in a Christian home. And it's always encouraging when people who are raised in the faith continue on in the faith into their adult years. But if we were to rely on that strategy to reach the world with the gospel, that means that the only people who are going to get to hear the gospel are our family members. Add to that the reality that North American Christians are barely even reproducing (less than two babies are born to every couple) and we start to see the inadequacy of this approach alone. We need to not only make more babies; we need to make more disciples. We need to be sharing the good news with those who did not grow up in Christian homes.

Jesus commanded us to “go and tell”, but unfortunately the chief evangelistic strategy employed by most Christians is “sit and wait.” This strategy gets played out in one of two ways:

1. Wait for people to come and ask you about your faith.

St. Francis of Assisi is often quoted as saying, *“Preach the gospel at all times and if necessary, use words.”*

Many will hear this and conclude that proclaiming the gospel by example is more virtuous and perhaps even more effective than actually proclaiming the gospel with our words, and then use it as an excuse to not share the gospel with their friends. But ironically, this is not only not something that he ever said—it's not true!

In my twenty-five plus years as a follower of Jesus, I have never once had someone come up to me and say, “Tell me about the faith that you never talk about.”

But don't take my anecdotal evidence for it—take a look again at the stats that were mentioned above about the

decreasing rate at which we are talking about our faith and the corresponding decrease in the rate of Christianity.

2. We turn our church services into evangelistic productions and wait for non-Christians to attend.

There has been a massive shift in the church in the last fifty or so years towards the “seeker-friendly” church model. The reimagining and reconfiguring of church services with the goal of getting more people in the door. Using attractions to draw a crowd under the claim that they’re doing whatever it takes to “reach the lost.”

Perhaps as the byproduct of this movement, 30 percent of Christians now believe it’s the local church’s job to share the gospel.⁹ But here’s the problem with this. I once went on a mission to visit several churches in my city, just to see what would happen if someone walked in who had never heard the gospel before.

Would they actually hear it clearly explained? And what if someone walked in that Sunday with the intention of becoming a Christian? Would they leave knowing how to make that decision?

Unfortunately, the answer to both questions was a loud, resounding “**no**” at every church I attended. Here’s the hard truth: If we’re relying on people hearing the gospel just by showing up at church, there’s a good chance they won’t even hear it—even if they come looking for it!

But there’s an even bigger problem—expecting the surrounding culture to show up at church is like rowing a boat out into the middle of the lake and expecting fish to hop

9 Barna Group, “Sharing Faith Is Increasingly Optional for Christians”, Barna.com, May 15, 2028, <https://www.barna.com/research/sharing-faith-increasingly-optional-christians/>

in! The whole methodology of the seeker-friendly church requires non-Christians to have a cross-cultural experience in order to hear the gospel, rather than asking Christians to have a cross-cultural experience in order to share the gospel. For the most part, a church's Sunday gathering is a weird place for someone who is not a Christian to want to attend.

Not only is this strategy a little crazy, but it also involves transforming our Sunday church gatherings into something that is comfortable for the culture rather than beneficial to Christians.

We've turned evangelism into something that paid ministers do rather than something every Christian does—and as a result we've transformed our church gatherings into a cheap knock-off version of things that the culture already likes to show up to.

To paraphrase Charles Haddon Spurgeon, one of the greatest preachers of the nineteenth century, the job of the church is not to entertain the goats of culture but to feed the sheep of God.

The thing that is going to draw people to Christ is not more smoke and lights during worship, better coffee in the lobby, or an 18-minute Ted Talk with some Bible thrown in. It's not living a good life and waiting for people to ask you about what you believe. It's not putting a Christian bumper sticker on your car and waiting for people to ask you about it. It's not wearing a Christian T-Shirt and waiting for other people to ask you why you wear such strange clothing. It's not saying "God bless" when people sneeze and then hoping someone will ask you about the hope that is within you. The

thing that is going to reach the world and fulfill the Great Commission is not even much of what gets classified as “missions” in the church—feeding the poor, giving people access to medical help, digging water wells, building houses. These things alone will not accomplish the task!

Let me be crystal clear—the way we’re going to reach our friends, our culture, our cities, and the world is through direct evangelism! No more assuming people are going to somehow pick up the gospel by osmosis. It’s going to take us actually opening our mouths and having real conversations with people about Jesus. That’s how it’s always worked, and that’s how we’ll reach people moving forward as well.

There is a unique missional moment upon the church at this time, and there is a clear call on all Christians in the midst of it ... we must go and share the good news of Jesus!



Confused at Best Buy

I approached the checkout and put my item down on the counter. As the teller reached out to scan it, I saw the tattoo on her arm. I knew it was Latin, but didn’t know what it said, so I asked, “I like your tattoo—what does it mean?”

She responded by telling me that it was a Latin phrase that meant “you can only save yourself.”

I responded by saying, “Oh, how interesting! Is that part of a belief system you hold to?”

She replied, “Not officially or anything, no. I just liked the quote.”

As she was talking I noticed that she also had cross earrings in her ears. So I commented, “That’s interesting because your tattoo says ‘you can only save yourself’, but you have cross earrings which are a symbol for God having to send His Son to save us!”

She tilted her head sideways in acknowledgement and laughed a little before replying, “My family is Christian, and they gave me the earrings.” I responded by asking, “Which do you believe? That you can save yourself, or that you need Jesus to save you?”

She paused for a second, then said, “I don’t know, I guess I’ve never really thought about that.”

I nodded in acknowledgement, then asked, “How is that going for you?”

She replied, “Not so well.”

I replied, “That seems like a pretty important question, and not one I would want to be unsure about.”

She responded thoughtfully, “Yeah, I guess so, hey?”

Then the guy behind me in line said firmly, “Hurry up!”