

Just Walk Across the Room

The Single Greatest Gift

Intro: We're about to embark on a very important category of Christianity that makes most people's blood run cold. Seriously, this is a subject that either makes people's apathy gene go into hyper mode. It makes some people feel incredibly guilty so they'd just rather not hear about it. Some feel grossly inadequate and feel that it "simply is not their calling." The topic for consideration is "Personal Evangelism."

Before you start thinking in images such as, "knocking on doors; talking to complete strangers; closing the sale like a magazine salesman" I want you to relax. That is not, at all, the type of thing I'll be preaching about.

I'd venture a guess that this four-week experience will be unlike anything you've ever read, seen, heard, or walked through as it pertains to the topic of evangelism. Here's why I say that. The type of evangelism we'll be exploring involves:

- No formulas
- No scripts
- No quizzes, tests, or on-the-spot demands for huge chunks of memorized information

Intrigued yet?

The paradigm we'll discover together is this: evangelism can be as simple as taking a walk across a room. And taking a walk across a room is something we can *all* do, wouldn't you agree?

What was the best gift you ever received as a child? It was just right. I remember back to several gifts that would be considered one of my personal favorites.

- Grandpa Ab gave my brother and I a hockey game.
- First grade. Plastic, colorful birds that perched on a rod. Two cork guns. They'd spin when you hit them.

It wasn't the expense of the gift. It was, intrinsically, the right gift at the right time.

What is the greatest gift that you could possibly give? Wouldn't it be a gift that had the longest shelf life? Wouldn't it be the one that gave maximum joy for the long haul?

The greatest gift that we can give somebody is knowing Jesus Christ and receiving an eternal inheritance. We know that. We just can't seem to pull the trigger.

I think that the next four weeks will enable you to dramatically improve your chances of giving that great gift.

Bill Hybels had been invited to a luncheon in the Deep South. As he and the other guests entered the hotel ballroom where the event was to take place and found their seats, they were asked to introduce themselves to the other folks around the table. Bill didn't know the other members of his table group but immediately noticed how diverse they all were ... just in terms of ethnicity, age, and so on.

Seated directly across from him, there was a tall, African-American gentleman ... kind of looked like a linebacker. When he said his name, it was distinctly Muslim. Then the next person went, and the next person, and they started their meal. At one point in the meal, the African-American Muslim made eye contact with Bill and mouthed the words, "I love your books!"

Here's how Hybels writes it:

I looked over my shoulder to see if there was some famous author standing behind me. There wasn't, so I said, "Me?"

He said, "Yeah, you! We'll talk later ..." He had this huge grin on his face, but I still thought that he had me confused with someone else. So after lunch he pulls me off to the side and says, "I now understand this is probably a little confusing because you assume I am a Muslim ... let me tell you a quick story.

"I have been a Muslim my whole adult life. Being an African-American Muslim in a southern city—and being in the profession that I am in—it's not always been easy. As you might imagine, I have some struggles in social settings."

He said, "In the profession I'm in, we have a lot of cocktail parties, and a lot of evening events; and the natural course for me at these parties is that I'm served a drink, I get some hors d'oeuvres, and I try to make business contacts in the room. Inevitably, I wind up standing alone at most parties until enough time has elapsed and I feel like I can gracefully make an exit ... and then I subtly leave.

This whole dynamic is just something I've learned to live with."

The Muslim man went on to tell Bill that one night, when he was at such a party, he found himself with a drink in one hand, a plate of food in the other, standing all by himself as usual. Sure, there were groups of people gathered throughout the entire room—talking, laughing, engaging in conversation about this or that—but he was there with no one to talk to and nothing to do. Except just stand there looking out of place.

At some point during the party, the Muslim man noticed a guy standing on the other side of the room who was in the middle of a conversation with people of his own color and his own "kind." The guy looked away from his group and saw our Muslim friend standing all alone just ten feet away. He was perplexed that this guy would even care to notice him, but what happened next would utterly shock him.

The guy actually excused himself from his conversation, turned away from the group, walked all the way across the room, stuck out his hand to the Muslim man, introduced himself and then asked for the Muslim gentleman's name.

From there, the conversation unfolded so smoothly ... so naturally. They talked about their mutual profession. They talked about their families. They talked about business in general and sports and all sorts of things. Eventually—in this same conversation—the issue of faith came up.

Our African-American friend told Bill that at that point in the conversation, he became a little reticent ... he just assumed that there would be an unfavorable reaction when the other guy learned he was Muslim. But he took the risk, and to his surprise, the guy said, "Well, I'm a Christ-follower, but, truth be told, I know almost nothing about Islam. Hey, I wonder if you would do me the courtesy sometime—maybe over breakfast one day—of giving me the Cliff's Notes version of your faith system ... you know, why you committed yourself to Islam. Hearing your story would be pretty interesting to me."

The Muslim man almost fainted! Can you imagine his surprise when he saw a Christ-follower in a social setting like that operating with such openness and grace?

Well, the two men agreed to meet for breakfast the following week, and the conversation that ensued was incredible. The Christian man felt free to ask questions about Islam, and the Muslim man felt free to answer them.

That meeting led to another meeting the following week. And another one after that. And another. For weeks on end, these two men got together over cups of coffee so that one Christ-follower could take an interest in a man living far from God.

At some point in this series of breakfasts, an interesting thing happened. The Muslim man realized that this Christian guy had been a good listener all this time ... week after week after week. He hadn't judged the Muslim man's life choices. He hadn't wedged his own agenda into their conversations. He just kept showing up with a listening ear and a genuine interest in the Muslim man's life.

I'll let the Muslim man give you the rest of the story, as he told it to Bill at the luncheon that day:

I really didn't remember that much about the Christian faith. I'd been a Christian at some point in my childhood, but the racism in our community had infiltrated my family's church. Eventually, we just left the faith altogether. Doesn't take a genius to know when you're not wanted. But for some reason I was prompted during one of our breakfast meetings to say, "You've been such a good listener all this time ... would you be willing to refresh my memory on the Christian faith?"

From there, it all happened so easily and respectfully and sensitively. And to make a long story short, many months later, after determining that Christianity was the superior faith system, I committed myself to Jesus Christ! And it has made an unbelievable change in my life, Bill. I am part of a local church now, and that is where I came across some of the books that you've written. I can't tell you the difference this whole thing has made in my life ... and in the lives of all of my family members.

Think of what life would have been like for that Muslim man if somebody hadn't taken a walk across the room.

Acts 8:26-39

There is a three part process necessary to “Walk Across the Room”

I. Enter The Zone of the Unknown

v. 26

²⁶Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Go south to the road—the desert road—that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.”

*** Have you ever known somebody who didn’t know the boundaries of your personal space? They’re those people who walk up to you and stand inches away from you and talk directly in your face.

I met just a person, the other night at Busch Stadium. He came in late. He sat down next to me. He stretched out and was definitely in my personal space. He wanted to yell at the top of his lungs as if he were a personal trainer for the athletes offering annoying advice. Rick Ankeel hit a home run in the first inning and the guy actually turned to me and hugged me! This man was invading my space!

We all have a comfort zone. It is where we feel safe. We might not even like our present situation but it is what we know. Take for instance the person who hates their job but remains in it because of the familiarity of it and the risk of going out and exploring new opportunities.

We all have a comfort zone! We prefer it there. On the other hand, I think that we’ll all agree, it’s a place for minimal growth. What are we missing if we never get out of that zone? Some of the best things that ever happened to you in what we’ll call “the zone of the unknown.”

*** I remember the time vividly. I stand in the men’s dorm at Central Christian College. I wanted to ask Jane Weede out. But that was outside my comfort zone. What if she said “no”. What if she told me that she’d already said “yes” to somebody else. I kept putting it off until I just had to either do or die. Cecil Brassfield had already asked Peggy Skinner out. The plan was to double date with them. So I mustered up the bravado I could and called. I couldn’t stand the rejection “face to face.” I blurted it out before I even thought! I folded like a cheap umbrella! “Cecil and I wanted to know if you’d like to go to the hayride

with us.” It never occurred to me until I got off the phone that Janie maybe didn’t know if she was going with Cecil or with me!” . . . and the rest is history!

Think of the good things that have happened to you in life and almost exclusively, they happened in the zone of the unknown!

God calls us sometimes to go outside our comfort zone. It take courage but there almost always is a great dividend when we do it.

II. Listen to the Spirit’s Prompting

v. 29

²⁹The Spirit told Philip, “Go to that chariot and stay near it.”

The Holy Spirit is alive and well. It was the Holy Spirit who prodded Philip into going up to a complete stranger. In order to hear the Holy Spirit we have to be open to the Holy Spirit. And the unfortunate truth is that many Christians are afraid to explore that.

We are so uncomfortable with the “Charismatic Gifts” that when somebody brings up the Holy Spirit we run faster than a bunch of illegal immigrants that have heard somebody yell “green card.”

I believe that there are times when the Holy Spirit prompts us in mysterious ways. But because we’ve so conditioned our minds to do things on our own, we scarcely hear his whisper.

*** Roy Weese was one of the finest me I ever knew. Roy was a great preacher and a humble, kind man. He graduated from Lincoln Christian Seminary. He was a friend to my folks for many years. Roy was a straight shooter. I didn’t know of him to exaggerate. I remember him telling me about occasions in his life when he heard the Spirit’s prompting. He told of one time when he was headed back home in his car from a revival. He said that he felt the urge to turn off the road and go down a gravel road. He made a couple of turns and found himself at a house totally unfamiliar to him. He never heard an audible voice, but he knew that he was supposed to go up to this house. He knocked . . . the door opened . . . and a man stood before him . . . and asked him what he wanted. Roy said, “I’m not sure. I’m Roy Weese and for some reason unknown to me, I’m supposed to be here.”

The man was caught off guard. He invited Roy into his house. It was dark. The man said the most unbelievable thing to him that if I didn't know Roy, I would insist that it was an exaggeration. He said, "I've been in here trying to get the courage to kill myself. My wife left me. And for the first time in my life, I prayed. I prayed, 'God, if you're up there . . . please give me a good reason as to why I shouldn't do this.'" Roy talked to him about Christ. He talked to him most of the afternoon and into the evening. He told him about the good news. He told him about hope. That evening the man chose life and gave his heart to Christ.

Isn't that unbelievable! Guess what . . . the Holy Spirit didn't prompt Roy Weese because he was a preacher. He prompted him because he was open to the Spirit. That same Spirit has probably prompted you . . . did you hear Him?

Life takes on greater depth whenever we listen to the Holy Spirit. He prompts us to go up close and make a difference.

Matthew 5:13

¹³"You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men.

Salt needs proximity. You can be the saltiest salt in the world but it does no good unless you make contact.

III. Just Walk

Romans 5:8

⁸But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Christ didn't hesitate. We were in deep need. We were lost. Just think about it. Christ was willing to walk across the cosmos to get to us. It was not because we were crying out to Him. We ran from Him. We rebelled against Him. He left the comfort of His eternal dwelling. He left the intimate conversations God and angels to help us. He who had no need now knew what it was like to be hungry and thirsty. He left the perfect environment of heaven and walked across the universe to feel pain, heat, cold. And why? Because He loved us and was willing to make that trek knowing full well that He was going to be rejected by men.

Doesn't it seem only fair that if He was willing to do that for you . . . that we could take a walk across the room for Him?

The hardest step you'll ever make is the first one. It takes your breath away. But it is well worth it.

The greatest gift you can offer somebody is the gift of God's acceptance through the vehicle of Christ's blood. Without it they are lost. And you have that gift. It cost you nothing. Why would you keep it from them?

If you're like me, you have family and friends who don't know Christ. You hold the most credibility because you have the advantage of relationship with them.

During a time of Israel's greatest rebellion a man by the name of Isaiah had a vision from God. God was going to try to save them from their sin.

Isaiah 6:8

⁸Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I. Send me!"

God still has the same heart. His redemptive plan is still needed. Will you get out of that comfort zone and just walk?