WHAT IS A CULTURE OF EVANGELISM?

I have lived cross-culturally for a good portion of my life, and if there's one thing I've learned, it's that it is next to impossible to understand a culture, any culture, by simply reading a book. So it is with definitions and instructions on a "culture of evangelism." Any explanation of it comes up short without real-world experiences to give it meaning.

Culture certainly has to do with shared ideas, a shared language, and a shared understanding of how to act. There are many expressions of culture: as broad as Chinese culture and as small as family culture. Culture is often invisible, especially to those who are in it. Similarly, a "culture of evangelism" in churches or fellowships has common biblical ideas, a biblical language, and shared biblical actions. This culture, too, is often invisible to those in it.

But when I talk with church leaders from around the world and tell them that I long for a "culture of evangelism," I don't need to define it. They understand me intuitively. They yearn for it, too. They long for their churches to be loving communities committed to sharing the gospel as part of an ongoing way of life, not by the occasional evangelistic raid event.

Though it's next to impossible to instruct someone about every action needed in a healthy culture of evangelism, I do

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think we can describe the yearnings we feel for it. So let's spend the rest of the chapter looking at those yearnings. Here are my top ten yearnings for a culture of evangelism:

1. A Culture Motivated by Love for Jesus and His Gospel

> For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised. (2 Cor. 5:14–15)

Evangelism often feels like pushing a ball uphill. But when I'm with people whose motivation for evangelism springs from a love for Jesus, the perception of evangelism changes. To be compelled by love to share the gospel individually is a beautiful thing, but when it happens in community, it's joyfully glorious. The need to badger people to share their faith evaporates. It becomes something we long to do. It becomes a way of thinking.

Recently I was with some friends who were encouraged about some new believers and how they were growing spiritually. Brian turned to Shanyl and said: "Shanyl, I've got to hand it to you. Danny was so hard-hearted to the gospel that most people would have given up, but you pursued him with amazing love, both for Danny and for Jesus. You didn't stop, and God used you. It's astounding now to see how the gospel has changed Danny's life."

As I listened to Brian encourage Shanyl, I was encouraged to remember the love I have for Jesus and his gospel, and I was reminded how much I want to share the gospel faithfully with

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others. The world, the flesh, and the Devil always oppose us in evangelism. But in a culture of evangelism, rooted in hearts of love for Jesus and his gospel, it feels as if the mountain tilts down a bit and we begin chasing the ball.

2. A Culture That Is Confident in the Gospel

> I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation. (Rom. 1:16)

"I wonder when they lost their confidence in the gospel," my British friend mused.

This was not language I was used to using. "What do you mean?" I asked.

We were speaking about a parachurch ministry that once had been a vibrant center of gospel witness, but had lately fallen into lukewarmness—sadly, history is full of such stories.

He pulled at his chin with his thumb and forefinger, then said, "I mean, at what point did they start trusting gimmicks and worldly methods rather than the plain message of the gospel?"

I yearn for a culture of evangelism that never trades confidence in the gospel for confidence in techniques, personalities, or entertainment gimmicks. Those who oppose the gospel always tell Christians that the modern world has made it irrelevant. They chip away at Christians' confidence in the power of the gospel. They did that ages ago, in a world that doesn't look that modern anymore, and they do it today, and will until Jesus returns. The world tempts weak Christians to be ashamed of the gospel. I yearn for a culture of evangelism in which we build one another up and remind one another

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to put aside worldly practices and techniques of evangelism, placing our full confidence in the power of the plain message of the gospel.

3. A Culture That Understands the Danger of Entertainment

> Your people who talk together about you by the walls and at the doors of the houses, say to one another, each to his brother, "Come, and hear what the word is that comes from the LORD." And they come to you as people come, and they sit before you as my people, and they hear what you say but they will not do it; for with lustful talk in their mouths they act; their heart is set on their gain. And behold, you are to them like one who sings lustful songs with a beautiful voice and plays well on an instrument, for they hear what you say, but they will not do it. (Ezek. 33:30–32)

People talked about the ancient Israelite prophet Ezekiel in the social network of his day (by the walls and doors) and called to one another, "Hey, let's go hear the hot new show in town: Ezekiel's preaching!" They went to hear him as if he were a "lusty singer" or a great musical performer. They saw Ezekiel not as a prophet speaking to them about their salvation but as an entertainer. For all their enthusiasm about the performance, what was on their minds was sex and money, not obedience to God.

Doesn't that sound like a modern problem? To get people to show up for a church service today, we need only to post a titillating topic on Twitter, put together a rousing musical performance, or find a charismatic speaker who pulls at people's heartstrings—extra points if he's funny. It's not hard. But beware, God warned Ezekiel, and he warns us today: you may get

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a crowd through such methods, but you won't get their hearts. To get hearts is a work of the Spirit alone.

In a culture of evangelism, we don't mistake entertainment for ministry, or ministry for entertainment. We declare together the wonderful truths of God. We tell one another of his great salvation, his glory among the nations, and his marvelous works (Ps. 96:2–3). I long for a church that understands the dangers of entertainment and sees it for what it is: a lion crouching at the evangelical door, ready to devour us. We need a culture of evangelism that never sacrifices to the idolatry of entertainment, but serves up the rich fare found in the gospel of Christ.

4. A Culture That Sees People Clearly

> From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh. (2 Cor. 5:16a)

How easy it is to adopt the culture of the world and regard people based on sexist, racist, or other superficial views. We tend to forget that those around us are flesh-and-blood people with real hurts, dreams, struggles, and loves. But Paul speaks of how our vision of people changes when we know Christ. We don't see them through the eyes of the world, as we once did, but through the eyes of God.

When we first moved into our neighborhood in Lexington, Kentucky, we genuinely desired to reach out to people around us. But our first encounter about spiritual things with our neighbor Tom, who lived three doors down, was less than promising. One day he saw me working in the yard and

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dropped by to visit. He held a mixed drink in one hand and a cigarette in the other. We were chatting about this and that, mostly about how great his yard looked, when my six-year-old son bounded up. "Smoking is dangerous—you need to quit," he blurted out with a frown on his face and hands on his hips. "Pray to Jesus, and he'll help you stop."

I stood speechless with a smile frozen on my face. "Oh, great!" I thought. "Where did that come from? They probably already think we're moralizing religious fanatics who sit around our table and talk about the evil neighbors." In David's defense, his Aunt Linda, a new believer, had committed to stop smoking, and David had been praying for her. Nevertheless, I was mortified.

But Tom ground out his cigarette, dropped to eye level with my son, and smiled as he put his hand on his shoulder. "You know what, David?" he said. "You're probably right, you're probably right."

What a gracious and wonderful response from Tom! It got me thinking about my view of him. I realized I needed to repent of thinking of Tom as just some guy down the street and see him for who he was. David's intro might have been rude, but it was better than my inaction, and it actually led to a relationship with Tom that I don't know would have happened if I hadn't started to see Tom as a real person.

When Paul says that we should see people through the eyes of Christ, he means for us to have a gospel view of people. So we see people as beautiful, valuable creatures made in the image of God. Each and every one of us carries God's mark. That is why Christians believe all people have dignity, worth, and value.

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At the same time, we recognize that every person is fallen, sinful, and separated from God. All people have twisted the image of God into horrible shapes. That is why Christians are not enamored with people either.

But in a culture of evangelism, most of all we're mindful of what people can become: new creations in Christ, renewed and restored by the transforming power of God (2 Cor. 5:17). I long to be with Christians who remember that people are image-bearers. I long to be with Christians who remember people's separation from God. Most of all, I long for a culture that remembers what people can become through the gospel.

5. A Culture That Pulls Together as One

> I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. (Phil. 1:3–5)

Paul wrote to the church of Philippi, telling them of his gratefulness to them for partnering with him in the ministry of the gospel. This is a picture of a culture of evangelism. They all pulled together for the gospel. Everyone was on game.

When I coached my five-year-old son's soccer team, we would gather the team (very, very cute) and ask, "Okay, team, when the other team has the ball, which of our players are on defense?" They would shout, with gusto, "Everyone!" Then we would ask, "And when we have the ball, which of our players are on offense?" "Everyone!" they answered. However, when it came to an actual game, putting that concept into play proved to be a bit more difficult with five-year-olds.

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Evangelism is like that. But the goal for both is the same: for all to pull in the same direction together.

In a culture of evangelism, there is an understanding that everyone is engaged. Have you ever heard someone say, "Evangelism is not my gift," as if that excused him from sharing his faith? That's a kindergarten understanding of evangelism. All Christians are called to share their faith as a point of faithfulness, not gifting (Matt. 28:19).

I long to share my faith in the context of a church that understands what I'm doing and is pulling with me. In such a culture, when I bring a friend to church, others don't assume that person is a Christian. They are not shocked when I introduce someone and say, "This is Bob, and he's checking out Christianity." And not only are they not shocked, but they respond with something like this: "I'm so glad you are here. I was in the same place a couple of years ago, and I'd love to hear about it. Tell me, what are you thinking through?"

I long for a culture where we are all working together toward the goal of being witnesses for Christ.

6. A Culture in Which People Teach One Another

> . . . always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you. (1 Pet. 3:15b)

> Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. (2 Tim. 1:13)

Peter instructs us to be ready to share reasons and answers for the hope within us. To be able to do this, we need thoughtful

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training, which we then put to use. This is why Paul reminds Timothy to follow what he's been taught.

I would happily trade all the pizzazz of stunning speakers, mind-blowing music, and wildly popular Easter pageants for a culture of evangelism in which people are trained to lead a Bible study with a non-Christian in the Gospel of Mark, point to the message of the gospel in the text, and urge the unbeliever to come to Jesus based on the truth of what he has learned from the Scriptures.

In a culture of evangelism, members teach one another the kind of things we looked at in the previous chapter: what is evangelism, what is the gospel, and what is true biblical conversion. We also teach one another how to share the gospel message. Then we do it all over again, knowing that we get rusty. In a culture of evangelism, people carefully teach one another how to share their faith in a biblical way.

7. A Culture That Models Evangelism

> What you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also. (2 Tim. 2:2)

The beautiful thing in a culture of evangelism, if we get it right, is that new believers have the zeal and the contacts that older Christians often lack. However, older Christians have the insight and knowledge that younger Christians need.

As I type, my wife is sitting on the couch preparing to meet with Ruth and Samanti this afternoon. Leeann is leading them both through *Christianity Explained*. Ruth is a new

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believer; she's excited about her faith and sharing the gospel. Ruth and Samanti work together and have a lot in common since they come from the same city in Sri Lanka. Samanti's father is Buddhist, her mother is Roman Catholic, and her husband is Muslim. This is typical of Dubai. As Ruth shared with Samanti about her Christian faith, Samanti told Ruth that she wanted to know more. Ruth is deeply aware that her life has been ransomed by Jesus, but when it comes to explaining her faith, she needs some help, especially with a person with Samanti's background. So she wisely brought Samanti to Leeann.

Leeann, on the other hand, is an evangelist with a wealth of knowledge and understanding, but her circle of friends, for the most part, is made up of mature Christians. Leeann was thrilled to meet and talk to Samanti. And Samanti needs Jesus!

The three of them are a great example of what happens in a culture of evangelism. Leeann takes the lead in explaining the gospel. Ruth learns about sharing her faith as she participates in the study and continues to nurture her friendship with Samanti. And, Lord willing, Samanti hears and responds to the amazing message that Christ saves sinners. In a culture of evangelism, people model evangelism for one another.

8. A Culture in Which People Who Are Sharing Their Faith Are Celebrated

> I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, so that I too may be cheered by news of you. For I have no one like him, who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare. For they all seek their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. But you know Timothy's proven worth, how as a son with a father he has served with me in the gospel. (Phil. 2:19–22)

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I love how Paul honors Timothy for his work in the gospel. In a similar way, John, who pastors another church in our city, regularly starts a fellowship time by asking for stories from those who had opportunities to speak about Jesus that week. After they share, he has someone pray for them.

This practice of celebrating evangelistic efforts is simple and doesn't take much time, but it's hugely important in developing a culture of evangelism. There is nothing so discouraging as feeling that a church is more interested in manning the nursery than sharing the faith.

I yearn to be in a church where even evangelistic attempts are championed. Even if an evangelistic effort doesn't lead to a gospel conversation, evangelistic failure is better than not trying evangelism at all.

9. A Culture That Knows How to Affirm and Celebrate New Life

> We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, since we heard of your faith in Christ . . . just as you learned it from Epaphras our beloved fellow servant. (Col. 1:3–4, 7)

Paul knew how to affirm new believers. He celebrated their conversion, but he kept his focus—and theirs—on Christ. He didn't elevate them inappropriately, but he didn't ignore them either. A culture of evangelism celebrates new life in Christ in the right way.

After a series of one-on-one meetings and Bible studies with Mark Dever, Rob rejected his former atheistic faith and

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told Mark that he had become a Christian. "Well, Rob," said Mark, "tell me what you mean." Rob explained the gospel and related how he had repented of his unbelieving way of life and put his complete trust in Christ.

Then Mark said: "Brother, from what you told me, I agree with you: you *have* become a Christian. Let's pray." After they prayed, Mark said: "You understand that the mark of true conversion is not a prayer, but a long-term walk with Jesus. So, even though I believe you have come to Christ, we'll see what happens as time goes on."

Mark's reply is an example of what I call the "'Hallelujah!' and 'We'll see'" response. We say "Hallelujah!" because true conversion is the best thing that can happen to a person. We say "We'll see" because we know that conversion can be counterfeit, even if unintentionally. The most important check is threefold: a good understanding of the gospel, a changed life, and a long-term walk with Christ.

Mark didn't keep Rob's conversion a secret, but neither did he elevate Rob as an instant celebrity. At his baptism, Rob shared, appropriately, how he had come to faith. But there were trials to come, and how he walked through them was more important than any conversion story.

In a culture of evangelism, Christians know how to respond to those who have recently come to faith.

10. A Culture Doing Ministry That Feels Risky and Is Dangerous

> I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, so that it has become known

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> throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ. (Phil. 1:12–13)

Paul's ministry was risky enough that he was thrown in jail. Likewise, I live in a part of the world where I actually know people who have gone to jail because they have lived faithful lives in Christ.

As we see in 2 Corinthians 10:5, Paul saw the Christian life as waging war on thoughts opposed to God: "We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ." This is risky; the world doesn't like to have its thoughts challenged. Are we willing to call people to risky evangelism? I long for a culture of evangelism that is risky in the sense that we're confronting culture. Mostly that means disregarding what people think of us.

Door of Hope Church in Portland, Oregon, is reaching out to hipsters with great effect. The church leadership even decided to take its Sunday evening service to a nearby park. It was the regular service, just held in the open air. They faced sneers, hecklers, and a woman who stripped off her top to try to shock the congregation. But others, who saw the kindness and love in the church, joined them.

Others take different kinds of risks. My friend Joanna says, "I don't even know how to do Bible study without a couple of Muslims in the group." We should all think through ways we can take risks in our particular contexts. A funny thing happens when we take risks: we become dangerous—that is, in the spiritual realms—to those who have their minds set against God.

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In Philippians, Paul says the gospel had become known among the imperial guard (Phil. 1:13). And when he sends greeting at the end of the book, he writes, "All the saints greet you, especially those of Caesar's household" (4:22). It's clear that Paul had seen some of his guards come to faith.

Paul risked, and his risky life for the gospel was a path to jail. But I've always loved the observation that it was not so much that Paul was chained to a guard, but that a guard was chained to Paul.

I long for a church where neighboring atheists and non-Christians see fellow atheists and non-Christians coming to faith—an indication that we're a part of a risk-taking culture of evangelism.

11. A Culture That Understands That the Church Is the Chosen and Best Method of Evangelism

> And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved. (Acts 2:46–47)

Okay, I know I said ten things. But there is one more, one that has run through all the other ten: I long for a church that understands that it—the local church—is the chosen and best method of evangelism. I long for a church where the Christians are so in love with Jesus that when they go about the regular time of worship, they become an image of the gospel. I long for a church that disarms with love, not entertainment, and lives out countercultural confidence in the power of the

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gospel. I long for a church where the greatest celebrations happen over those who share their faith, and the heroes are those who risk their reputations to evangelize.

I yearn for a culture of evangelism with brothers and sisters whose backs are up to mine in the battle; where I'm taught and I teach about what it means to share our faith; and where I see leaders in the church leading people to Jesus. I want a church where you can point to changed lives, where you can see people stand up and say, "When I came to this church two years ago, I didn't know God, but now I do!" I long to be a part of a culture of evangelism like that. I bet you do, too.

I mentioned earlier that I do not think programs are the best or even the primary way we should do evangelism. What I do think is that the best outreach happens in a culture of evangelism inside a healthy church. This is far too big a topic for just one of the top ten; the role of the church and the way of evangelism is our next chapter.

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