

Evangelism - The Lost Art of Telling Three Stories, Not One

Blog post by Michael Frost (mikefrost.net)

Remember when your church used to run evangelism training seminars where everyone was taught how to share their faith via a memorized script or a tract or a series of provocative questions (*"If you were to die tonight..."* gulp)?

I remember attending courses like that and I couldn't help but feel like a door-to-door salesman being trained in how to present the products benefits, respond to any pesky objections or questions, and finally how to close the deal. The trainer told us that one of the big obstacles to successfully evangelizing people was the temptation to get side-tracked. Side-tracks were the worst. We were trained in how to stick to the main topic and bring the presentation to the point where we could confront the person directly with their need for salvation. In order to get there we had to make an effort to think through any situations or issues people might raise and have a clear set of responses that guide the conversation back to the main point.

Courses like those probably gave you the impression that when it comes to evangelism there's only one story that matters — the story of Jesus dying for our sins.

But what if I told you evangelism isn't just about memorizing and retelling one story? No, it's much more complicated than that. It's about telling *three* stories. *

Yep, as if learning one story wasn't enough, I want you to learn three stories. And I want you to learn to tell them really well. Those three stories are (1) the story of God, (b) your own story of life with Jesus, and (c) your non-Christian friend's story. And the sweet spot for evangelism is in the intersections between those stories. Let me explain.

Story 1: The Story of God

Of course, evangelism involves talking about God, but not like a sales pitch. More like an epic story. It's the story of a God who reigns over everything and whose realm is one of justice, beauty, freedom and love. God created this world according to his good purposes for all life, but human sin opened the door for evil, undermining those purposes.

But Jesus showed us what the good life looks like. He lived it, taught about it, demonstrated it. His is a world devoid of evil and sickness, a world of justice, peace, joy and community. He took our punishment, conquered evil, brought forgiveness, defeated death, and ushers in a new social and political order according to God's purposes, one that mirrors God's heavenly kingdom.

The good news is that this new order has begun with the resurrection of Jesus, and we live in the light of the future in the power of the Spirit.

There's so much more I could say here, but suffice to say that the story of God is not just news about how to avoid going to hell when you die. It is an invitation to healing and wholeness, to an experience of the presence and power of God in our lives *now*. You need to learn to tell it really well.

Story 2: Sharing Your Story

The second story we need to learn is our own. You might think you know your own story, but a lot of Christians don't spend enough time reflecting on their own spiritual autobiographies. How is God's story shaping my story? How is God healing me? How is God changing me? How am I growing and changing to conform more and more to the values of God's kingdom. Where is Jesus present in my story?

This involves us knowing how Jesus was present in our lives even before we became Christians. It also involves how we see God being present in our lives during even non-sacred activities. Is God there when we're watching something on Netflix, or surfing, or doing our tax return, or fulfilling a mundane chore or duty? Yes. Think about how God is present and learn to share this with others.

Also, we should be able to talk about how our work toward justice, reconciliation, hospitality and generosity are inspired, shaped and sustained by God's presence in our lives.

We need to practice sharing our biographies, not just how and when you became a Christian, but how and when God is turning up in your life these days. We need help in knowing how to talk about these things in real, colloquial, winsome ways. That involves acknowledging our failings and uncertainties, being genuine, not embellishing our experiences, not relying on clichés. As Rebecca Manley Pippert writes,

"Our problem in evangelism is not that we don't have enough information—it is that we don't know how to be ourselves. We forget we are called to be witnesses to what we have seen and know, not to what we don't know. The key on our part is authenticity and obedience, not a doctorate in theology."

Story 3: Telling The Other's Story

It might sound presumptuous to suggest that our job is to tell people *their* story. But there is nothing so intimate, so loving, as being able to put another person's story into words. As I just mentioned, many of us have never reflected on our own stories and are quite limited in our ability to talk about them. It's the same for non-Christian people. Life just happens. We get busy. We don't take the time to stop and examine our own biographies, let alone put them into words.

But when someone — a dear friend, a therapist, a close relative — puts into words our deepest longings, or explains how they see the events of our lives shaping us, it can be so incredibly powerful and intimate.

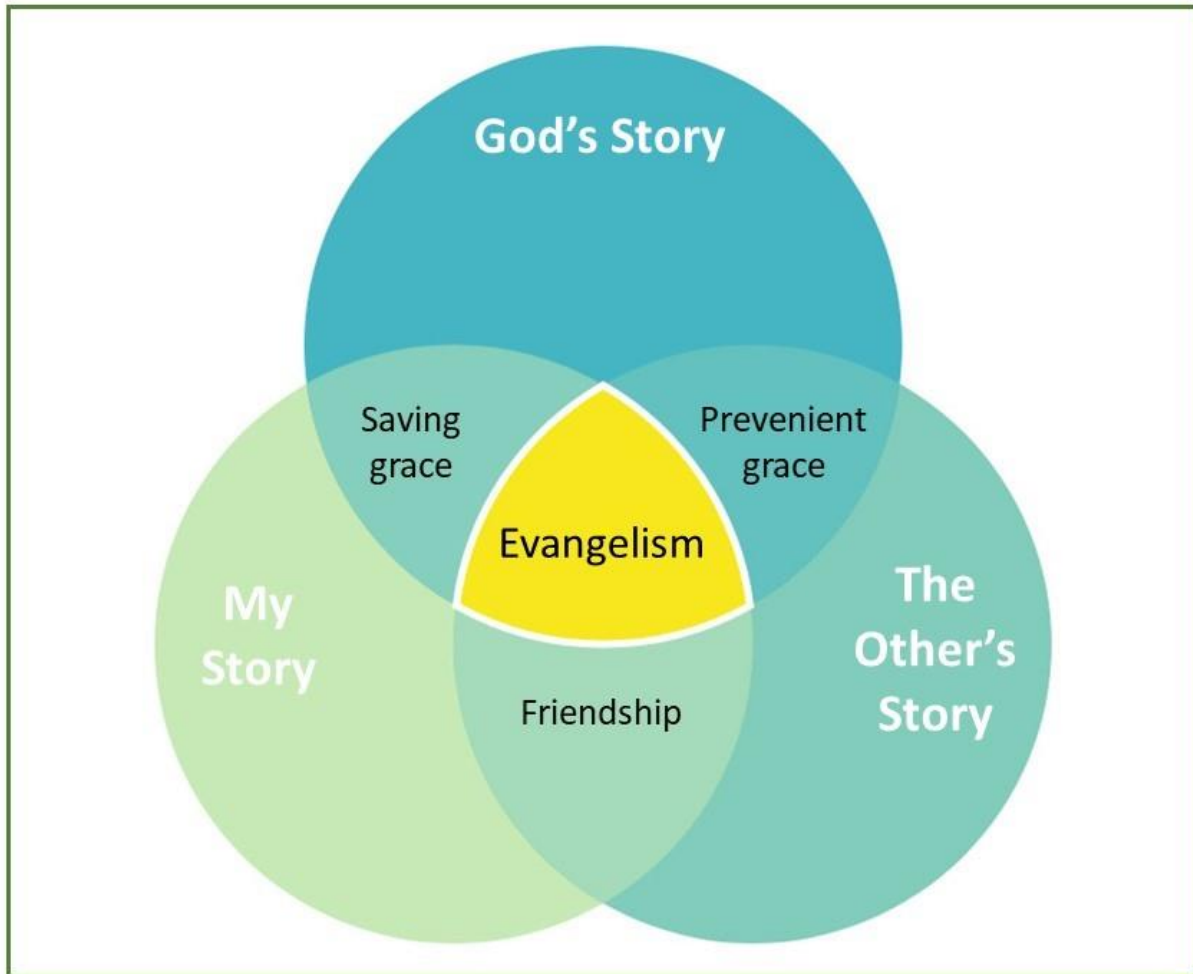
In order to be able to do this we need to make ourselves available to them. We need to be loving, attentive, interested friends. Learning to listen well in order to genuinely hear and understand is an essential skill in evangelism. Well, in life, actually. We have to become better listeners in order to tell someone their own story.

Become curious about other people. But remember that too many questions can feel like an interrogation. Try asking questions without question marks. For example, “Tell me about your family”, “I’d like to hear more about that”, “Tell me how that’s working out for you”. Also, ask tough questions gently. Some stories are too scary to tell right away.

Most people are lousy listeners, often only pausing long enough to think of something to say. They compete with you for airtime and leave you feeling exhausted rather than understood. Instead, we should practice what counsellors call active listening. That’s listening with empathy. You do it by maintaining eye contact with the other; leaning toward the person; asking questions; and repeating answers back for clarity. Try to maintain a state of prayer and a learning posture to unwrap the gifts in others.

Finding the Points of Intersection

As you’re learning to tell these three stories, you’ll discover that the most important thing is to find the points where those stories overlap. This is where the magic happens. The most fertile ground for evangelism is where two or three of the stories intersect, as shown in this Venn diagram:



Find Where God's Story Intersects with My Story – the places where God's story overlaps with mine are the many ways grace is working on me, guiding me, healing me, shaping me more and more into the person God wants me to be. I call this intersection "Saving Grace," but it's not just about me being saved. This intersection is where you can see all the evidences that God's reign is changing me.

Find Where God's Story Intersects with The Other's Story – God's story of grace overlaps with an unbeliever's story even if that unbeliever doesn't understand it or recognize it. This is called "Prevenient Grace." The term prevenient comes from an archaic English usage meaning "anticipating," "going before," or "preceding". So, prevenient grace refers to God's grace that precedes any human decision. It exists prior to and without reference to anything a person may have done. I need to know another person's story so well that I can identify all the ways I see God at work in their lives, even without them noticing.

Helping people to see how God has touched our lives and theirs is really beautiful work. It's possible to learn to recognise the myriad ways that God touches us outside of that which is openly spiritual and we can share these moments with others. God touches us

through painful growth experiences of loss and grief, through moments of creative and athletic excellence, through moments of victory over our problems and through the tenderness of relationships.

These moments when we touch something eternal and noble and good are God's fingerprints on our lives — God's prevenient grace. People need to realise that the God they feel they do not know has, in fact, been at work already in their lives in many ways.

Even the shame, doubt and despair of not being the person you know you could be, can be the indication of the Spirit's presence, giving a sensitivity to sin in your life. A moment where you connect with a deep truth through the work of an author or an artist can also be the Spirit's work. A virtuoso performance full of human excellence can leave you feeling you need somewhere to put your wonder and gratitude. All these things can be seen as the Spirit at work through prevenient grace urging the heart toward worship of God.

Find Where My Story Intersects with The Other's Story – When you think about it, all conversations between good friends are about where and how our stories overlap. There's nothing more affirming and empowering than when a friend says, "Me too!" It shows our commonality and our shared brokenness, and it fosters humility and hope.

Good evangelism doesn't just involve finding where the places of intersection are, but *expanding them*. Allow more and more of God's story to overlap with yours. Allow more and more of your story to overlap with your friend's. And as this happens, you'll discover more and more of the ways God's grace has touched his or her life story.

The Place Where All Three Stories Intersect

If you scroll back up to that Venn diagram you'll see there's a zone where all three stories intersect. This is the place where Saving Grace, Prevenient Grace, and Real Friendship come together. This is the place where we share about God's story and how it has changed us for the better, and where we can explore how that same God has already touched our friend's life. And such sharing is done in the context of a close, trusting friendship.

As we discern God's grace in their story, through carefully, gently and respectfully listening and uncovering their story, there are several things to keep in mind:

- Evangelism doesn't mean sharing everything all at once – in fact if you are true to God's story, you *can't* do it all at once!
- You don't have to do it the same way every time – in fact if you are true to their story, you *can't* do it the same way every time!
- You don't have to have all the answers – in fact if you are true to your story, you know you really *don't* have all the answers.

There's much more I should say — about the need to demonstrate love in practice, and the importance of community — but in the interests of keeping this short, I'll leave it here. Elaine Heath was right when she said, "Evangelism is intrinsically relational, the outcome of love of neighbor, for to love our neighbor is to share the love of God holistically."

And as Tim Keller once wrote, "Everybody has got a story. If you're able to inhabit that so well that they feel that you know their story better than they do, and then show in a compelling way how that story is only going to find resolution in Jesus, then they are going to find a compelling case for Christianity."

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