

Study 8: Evangelism at Work: Conversion through the workplace

Key idea:

Many of us spend long hours at work. People come to faith, in part, through the relations they form and develop at work, and the things they learn from Christians at work. Workplaces bring special challenges. We need to prepare for them

While this study is called 'Evangelism at work', I think it is better to think of our aim as 'Conversion at work'. We know that conversion is always an act of God (the Holy Spirit), but we have an important part to play in the conversion of the people we meet at and through work. 'Evangelism' (the spreading of the Christian gospel by public preaching or personal witness) is one of the tools.

You may want to start by asking people what their experience of sharing Jesus at work has been, but take care with this question. Some people get burnt off early, and resolve to never speak about Jesus at work again. Others bash on with little self-reflection on whether they are doing more good than harm. As you may not want to colour the discussion too deeply with personal stories of 'failures' and 'successes', it may be best to dive into the questions.

1. What are the steps a non-Christian worker has to take before they become a Christian? (A worker may not need to take every step, and they may be taken in a different order, but what are the steps?) In answering this, make sure you think of emotional steps. [See the study notes for my suggested steps.]
2. Who can help people with these steps? [Yes, of course, we can but the three agents in most conversions are the Holy Spirit, us and the Church (either a Church or, at least, some other Christians). We know that conversion is only a work of the Holy Spirit, but he graciously involves us in his work. God can save, despite our mistakes. Nevertheless, we want to do what we can to help.]
3. What can we do to help? [See the detailed notes below. I cannot over-emphasise the importance of friendship.]
4. Do you think you are prepared to talk about Jesus at work? If not, what knowledge, skills, confidence etc do you need to acquire?

5. How prepared are you to give an account of your faith? (1 Peter 3:15)
6. Where does 'working well' fit into effective evangelism/witness? [See the notes below.]
7. When a person first goes to church what are the key questions in their mind? [I believe, most people have three questions in mind, IN THIS ORDER: Will I make friends? What do I have to do/believe to belong here? Is it true? A lot of our effort is often directed to this third question. While it is ultimately essential, it does not need to be rushed.]
8. What can we do to help with these things?

End of Study

Study Notes

The steps

I think the steps a person may need to take to become a Christian may include the following.

1. They must overcome (or put to one side) any initial barrier to even thinking about Christianity or Jesus. For example, these barriers may include, 'All religions are the same', 'Christians hate gays/same sex marriage', 'the subordination of women', 'the church is hypocritical and abusive', 'all religions promote violence', 'the historical baggage of the church is too great e.g. the crusades'.⁸⁶
2. They have, or develop, a willingness to compare world-views (where do values come from? why are we here? is there any point to existence?)
3. They recognise that not all Christians are weird.
4. They recognise that not all religions are the same, either in theology or internal relationships.
5. They must meet at least one Christian who is happy in his/her Christianity, does not force it, but is prepared to talk about it openly, without being defensive or judgmental.
6. They need to become intrigued about Jesus and what Christians believe.
7. They need to be interested in finding out more.
8. Some people may need to make the emotional step of giving up the way they used to think of themselves, or the way that other people think of

⁸⁶ I take this idea from the teaching of John Dickson at a training day he ran at St Barnabas Broadway.

them. (Put more brutally, they will need to give up the 'vanity of independence'.)

9. They must understand Christianity is about one person, Jesus Christ.
10. They must be prepared to go to the Bible to find out about Jesus. (At this stage I don't think it is essential to believe the Bible is the word of God etc, just that it is the best place to find out about Jesus).
11. They must recognise that Jesus' claims on our lives will require some adjustment in outlook, relationships and lifestyle (e.g. political views shaped by Christian love for neighbour, one's attitudes to sex and money, etc.)
12. They must be prepared to make those changes.
13. They must come to accept the 'idea' that there is a God who creates and sustains everything, and this opens the door to the possibility of the incarnation, resurrection and miracles. (Note: often people work backwards from the historical evidence for the resurrection to the possibility of miracles and God as we know him, but, one way or the other, belief in the works of God are necessary for faith.)
14. They must come to faith, which we understand as both believing the claims of Jesus are true, and trusting him.

NB This list is not exhaustive. Each person may have their own issues to deal with. But this list shows that conversion is not just about having a 'good talk' at work.

What we can do

Make friends. Make friends. Make friends. Take your time. Do not think you have to bring up the subject of faith. At work you can afford to be reactive.

Don't hide that you are a Christian. Paul tells us in Romans 1 that he is not ashamed of the gospel, and neither should we be. If you are asked what you did on the weekend, say you went to church, a weekend away, hung out with Christian friends etc. But let that sink in. Don't think you have to then go on and push Jesus. Be intriguing. Get them thinking why a nice/normal/smart/cool person like you would be a Christian.

The 'do not be ashamed' example may also take us into discussions that arise when God is being blasphemed, or Christianity is being attacked.

Should we step in to 'defend Jesus'? Judgement is required here. Not all fights are worth fighting. If a drunken workmate is sounding off, perhaps little good will come from launching into a full-blown defence of the gospel. However, we know we can expect to suffer for the gospel, so there will come times when we have to say we are Christians and give a good defence.

When you are asked questions about your faith/Jesus/church, do not feel you need to give comprehensive answers? Leave room for more questions, or for your answers to sink in.

We do not all have the gift of an evangelist (see Ephesians 4:11). But we are all called to give an account of our faith (1 Peter 3:15). God will use our honourable conduct to save others (1 Peter 2:12). We are called to love our neighbours. One way to do this is to share the good news of Jesus. However, the thing we want is not a feeling that we have spoken well, but that God does his work of conversion, which, as we saw above in the suggested steps of conversion, involve a lot more than a good conversation about Jesus.

Know why you are a Christian. Be able to give a short explanation of when, how and why you became a Christian. Be able to adapt it to different situations. Be able to explain what Jesus means to you (the difference he makes in your life). Be able to explain the help Jesus is to you at work (e.g. you know why you work, how to work and where work fits into the rest of your life).

In practical terms the two best things we can do is work well and make friends. Fellow workers will not admire us or be attracted to us or Jesus if we do not work well. Friendship is the best (and usually the only) context in which to share our faith.

Become friends before you invite them to church. Make sure they trust you to still be their friend, even if they do not respond well to church. And be prepared to be their friend for a number of years. I think it is usually best to invite them to a meal, or something else social, before we invite them to church. We want them to know we care about them as a friend, not as a 'conquest'.

Don't be defensive. There is much in the history of the church that is indefensible. But know its successes (Western morality, human rights,

hospitals, schools, charities etc). Don't try and answer questions you don't know the answer to, for example, questions outside your knowledge or things God reserves to himself (e.g. why some people suffer more than others).

Ideally be able to deal with issues around human suffering, e.g. why does an all powerful, all loving God allow sickness, suffering, loss and death? I find the best way to deal with this is to focus on how God understands these issues **and suffers with us**, and helps us through our suffering. There is no humanly satisfactory explanation of why some people suffer more than others (see John 9:1-12, Luke 13:1-5). There are some things which only God can handle, and we are not God. But Jesus knows what suffering is. He came to bring an end to suffering. Jesus cries with us (John 11:35).

Do not be overly dogmatic on contested areas (e.g. the historicity of Adam and Eve) and areas which some people take to be literal truths and others understand as symbolic or allegorical (e.g. Genesis 1-3). The aim is to leave room for further conversation, not to close-off discussion.

As far as I know, no-one has ever been argued into the kingdom. Many people end up finding the evidence for God overwhelming, but we want them to be overwhelmed by the love and person of Jesus, not by our arguments.

We need to live the gospel. There is little point claiming to be Christians if we do not live like Christians. This includes in personal ethics and Christian hope (we know who is in control and we know where we are going). Treat people with respect. Do not join work mates in denigrating clients, competitors, bosses etc. If asked why you try to see the good in other people, consider an answer like, 'I believe everyone is important to God' (i.e. be enigmatic, leave the door open for them to ask other questions).

Think through answers to some confronting questions. 'What do you think of me? What does your God think of me? Do you think I'm going to hell? Why does God send people to hell? Why are you Christians always telling people what to do? Why does your God let this happen?' You may never face these questions, but it is better to know the answers in case you are confronted with them. If in doubt, discuss them with your pastor.

Ask if they would like to read the Bible with you or someone else. Don't be offended if they would prefer to read it with someone else. We need to

recognise that work relations may make some people awkward about sharing deeply.

Note: I have not reproduced or critiqued the old cliché of 'proclaim the gospel: use words if you have to.' I think 'words v action' is a false dichotomy, which does not take into account our different gifts and opportunities. Some people appear to be able to speak winsomely about Jesus in any situation. Yet many people overcome their initial reservations about anything Christian because of the example Christians set. We must, however, recognise that, sooner or later, people will need to hear words about Jesus. We need to be prepared to speak those words. I have also not chosen to say anything about the different approaches introverted or extraverted people may take. We all need to work out how best we can share Christ, and the suggestions above should not be limited by personality or giftedness.