

How to Avoid the Five Biggest Mistakes in Sharing Your Faith

by Larry Moyer

I don't know when I have felt any dumber. As I backed my car into our driveway, I stopped just before entering the garage and opened my door on the driver's side to look at something laying on the driveway. Then, looking over my right shoulder, I began backing my car into the garage. Suddenly, I heard the crunch of steel hitting steel. I looked to my horror at the open car door I had just driven into the bumper of our Bronco parked to my left. I had forgotten to close my door! When my wife took the car to the body shop to have the door fixed and repainted, the floor manager lifted my spirits (until he gave me the bill!). He told my wife, "Oh, that's one of the most common mistakes people make. It makes you feel very stupid, but tell your husband it happens all the time. It's easy to do."

Evangelism is obviously much more serious and extremely eternal. However, there are ways in which evangelism is similar to backing a car into the garage; there are common mistakes people make. Just like with closing the car door, these mistakes can be easily corrected and our effectiveness in evangelism greatly enhanced.

What are some of these most common mistakes? Five are worth discussing with a view to sharpening our skills in speaking to others about the Savior.

Mistake #1-Starting with the Wrong Question

An individual once wrote to me, "How do you witness to someone who has been in church for 50 years and would be offended if you asked, 'Are you a Christian?'" My answer was simple: don't ask him! The reason is, most churchgoers will answer "yes." Then, even though you have every reason to believe they do not understand the biblical definition of a Christian, if you pursue the issue, it appears as though you are disputing their word.

Instead, once the conversation has been turned to spiritual things, a better question is, "Has anybody ever taken a Bible and shown you how you can know you are going to heaven?" That puts the emphasis where the Bible puts it-on eternal life culminating in the presence of God Himself. It also strikes at a need they have. Many who label themselves "Christian" admit they do not know for certain they are going to heaven. This admission gives you the opportunity to explain how the Bible says you can *know* you are going to heaven, and allows you to give a clear presentation of the gospel.

Mistake #2-Sharing the Bible, not the Gospel

Who reaches more non-Christians for Christ than anybody else? The answer is new believers. One reason is they don't know anything! All they know is "Jesus died for me." They take that simple message and win a world to Christ with it.

Why shouldn't they? After all, that is our message for the lost. God defines the gospel in 1 Corinthians 15:3-5 using four verbs: "Christ *died* for our sins...he was *buried*...he was *raised*...he *appeared*" (italics added). Since His burial is proof that He died and the fact that He was seen is proof that He arose, the gospel in its simplicity is "Christ died for my sins and rose from the dead."

As many believers grow, however, they forget that simple message and instead share the entire Bible instead of the gospel. They lay everything from Genesis to Revelation on a non-Christian instead of sharing the simple gospel of Christ.

While speaking in Oklahoma City, a believer once said to me, "I do evangelism the same way you do. The only thing I don't tell people is that Jesus Christ died and arose. That's probably important, isn't it?" Important? *That* is the message. The Bible contains 66 books. The gospel can be reduced to 10 words: Christ died for our sins and rose from the dead.

Mistake #3-Unclearly Presenting What the Bible Means by "Believe"

Heaven is not a difficult place to get to. Yet we make it so because of confusing and unclear terminology. A pastor told me of a businessman who leaned over his desk one day. His agonizing words reflected his agonized spirit. "One person says, 'Invite Christ into your heart'; another says, 'Come to God.' Another says, 'Give your life to Jesus'; another says, 'Accept Christ.' Would you please tell me, what must I do to be saved?"

The one book of the Bible written for non-Christians is the Gospel of John. John acknowledges that as his purpose when he says, "But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:31). John uses the word "believe" 98 times. It simply means, understanding that Christ died for me and arose, accepting that as true, and trusting in Christ alone as my only way to heaven.

As a traveling speaker, I do an immense amount of flying. There are times I am privileged to have my wife with me. Flying bothers her much more than it does me, and I'll confess I'm not nearly as helpful as I could be at times when she is afraid. As we are taking off and she is singing, "Nearer, My God, to Thee," I'll say, "For some reason this plane is not taking off the way all the others have."

But there is one thing everyone who flies knows. You are not depending on a plane to get you to your destination. You are depending on a pilot-a *person*. God is asking us to come to Him as sinners, recognize His Son died for our sins and arose, and trust in Jesus Christ alone as our only way to heaven.

We need to ask individuals to *trust* in Christ alone as their only way to heaven. Why make confusing what God makes so clear?

Mistake #4-Assuming Anyone's Salvation

He appeared to be a friendly kind of chap, so I decided I'd try something. I opened my briefcase on the plane, allowing him to see my Bible. Instantly he asked, "Are you a preacher?" I said, "Yes, why did you ask?" (As though I didn't know!) He answered, "I came to God several months ago." I said, "That's exciting." He replied, "It sure is. My whole life has changed." I then said, "Well, let me ask you something. Have you come to a point in your life that you know if you were to die you'd go to heaven?" Immediately he answered, "Oh, no. In fact, I'm sure I wouldn't." Imagine. A moment ago he told me he came to God. Now he told me he was certain he wouldn't go to heaven. That allowed me to say, "Has anybody ever taken a Bible and shown you that you can know you are going to heaven?" About 15 minutes later, I had the privilege of seeing him trust Christ. As he stepped off the plane with teary eyes, he put his arm around me and said, "Thanks for talking to me. I knew something was missing. I just didn't know what."

One cannot assume anyone's salvation. There are those who have gone through all kinds of emotions, said all kinds of prayers, and responded to all kinds of evangelistic invitations yet have not understood the gospel and therefore have not trusted Christ to save them. It should concern us that when George Barna took a survey in the early 90s one-third of all "born again" Americans said they would get to heaven as a result of their good works, rather than God's grace through Jesus Christ. That immediately tells me those one-third did not know the Savior. Jesus' words are very clear, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6).

Mistake #5-Looking at a Lack of Response and Failure in Evangelism as Synonymous

Few subjects have been plagued with more erroneous thinking and unbiblical teaching than evangelism. One wrong concept is "God expects you to bring your friends to Christ." Some people who evangelize with no response think God is up in heaven saying, "What did I ever save that nincompoop for? He can't speak to anybody about Me."

The Bible doesn't teach that God wants me to bring my friends to Christ. In fact, John 6:44 says, "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him." Instead, God simply expects me to bring Christ to my friends. *He*

has to bring my friends to Christ.

As we present Christ, we find people in different stages of receptivity. Jesus addressed this when He said, "One sows and another reaps" (John 4:37). There are some with whom I will be the fourth of fourteen people God uses in bringing a person to Christ. With others, I'll be the fourteenth of fourteen. God wants me to concentrate on being faithful and let Him be concerned with making me fruitful. If someone doesn't trust Christ after I've have done whatever I can in simply being a witness, I've been as faithful as the one God eventually uses to lead him to the Savior.

I recently heard the comment, "Experience is a valuable teacher. It helps you recognize a mistake when you do it again." We will make mistakes in evangelism. After all, that's how we learn to do anything. But mistakes are seldom fatal, nor do they have to be repeated. When we learn from them, we enhance our skills in evangelism and, interestingly enough, even our enjoyment of the opportunities. What could be more enjoyable than having someone in heaven walk up and say, "Thank you. After all, you're the one who invited me here"?

© Dallas Theological Seminary 1998.
All Rights Reserved. Used with permission.