

# Reaching a Postmodern World through Servant Evangelism

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In March of 1998 I visited a laundromat with a group of students. I spent about twenty dollars worth of quarters and left without washing any clothes. Those two hours are among the most delightful memories of my life. Perhaps you wonder how the words “delightful” and “laundromat” coincide. How could spending money in a laundromat, with nothing to show for it, produce delightful memories? While in the laundromat we spoke with the patrons, telling them that we were from a local Baptist church and that we would love to pay for their loads of laundry. Most could not believe that total strangers would pay for their wash. “Why?” some would ask. Our reply: “We are simply showing the love of Jesus in a practical way.” I walked up to a student named Lori, who was speaking with a lady named Linda. Linda had not attended church regularly for years. As we shared with her, she was amazed at the simple act of kindness we showed. Perhaps in her case it was more than a simple act of kindness since she apparently had her entire family’s wardrobe with her! I can honestly say that it was the best ten dollars I have ever spent, for Linda joyfully opened her heart to the Lord, as did two other adults to whom we witnessed.

When going to the laundromat results in people meeting the Lord, you can see why such an experience can be a delight. Imagine how perplexed the Lord must be at his followers who consider “evangelism” and “wonderful experience” to be

oxymoronic. Somehow the church in America has forgotten that when one shares the gospel, one is sharing *good news*. How can believers penetrate the unchurched, postmodern culture with this good news? Perhaps more importantly, how can we motivate believers to penetrate the unchurched world?

As we plunge headlong into a postmodern culture, the church must confront the changing times without changing the truth of the gospel. After years of training believers in personal evangelism, the most nagging question for me remains how to get believers who know *how* to share the gospel to *share* the gospel. No approach compares to the simple, practical strategy known as servant evangelism. Servant evangelism actually does two things: it mobilizes believers to witness, and it provides an effective way to share the timeless gospel in a timely manner.

We can face a rapidly changing culture through a simple principle: add without subtracting. How can we add elements to the presentation of the gospel without subtracting from its substance? Servant evangelism provides the perfect example. Servant evangelism merely adds intentional acts of kindness to the discipline of intentional, personal evangelism. Servant evangelism offers the simplest, most transferable, and yes, most *fun* approach for moving believers closer to a biblical lifestyle marked by consistent witnessing.

## Servant Evangelism Defined<sup>1</sup>

Servant evangelism is nothing more or

less than a combination of intentional, personal witness with intentional acts of kindness. The concept was first popularized a few years ago by a Cincinnati pastor named Steve Sjogren, who planted and grew a church on the concept of servant evangelism.<sup>2</sup> More recently it has become a staple of evangelism training at several seminaries and in many churches.

The gospel message was, is, and will always be the power of God to salvation (Rom 1:16). Furthermore, no substitute exists for the power of prayer and the work of the Spirit. The essentials of the gospel form the changeless aspect of witnessing. Acts of kindness simply add a helpful way to communicate the unchanging gospel.

### **Servant Evangelism Described**

Quarters at laundromats, free car washes, light bulb and soda giveaways, even toilet cleaning service, all function as examples of servant evangelism. While the specific means used may change, acts of kindness as a means to present Christ is as old as the New Testament and as relevant as next week. Its profundity can be lost in its simplicity. The concept involves a group of believers who begin practicing simple acts of kindness with an intentional aim toward presenting Christ. In many cases, such acts of kindness open the door for the greatest act of kindness a Christian can give: sharing the gospel.

Servant evangelism is intentionally evangelistic, but not coercive. When performing an act of kindness, the one witnessing says, "I am doing this to show the love of Jesus in a practical way." Then, as the Holy Spirit opens the door, usually through the individual asking for further information, the person who is serving has a captive audience with whom he can

share the gospel and his own testimony. Unless you have used this approach, you likely will not believe how many unchurched people want to hear the gospel after seeing the love of Christ demonstrated. On some occasions, I have taken a group to offer a free car wash, and those receiving the wash were determined to pay us something in return. After insisting that the service was free, they openly and happily received a gospel witness. The first time we did a car wash, a man with a Hindu background met the Lord. One of our students who shared Christ with him was a former Hindu. Call that a coincidence if you like, but I call it a divine appointment. By the way, many more such encounters are possible if we are out in the culture sharing Christ.

What if the other person is not open to the gospel? Do you leave the soap on the car to dry? Certainly not. You remain gracious and offer him or her a gospel tract, literature, or prayer. Such an act of kindness may open the door for a future witness.

Kindness does not mean telling people what they want to hear so that they feel good about themselves. Acts of kindness in and of themselves, while by no means evil, should never be confused with witnessing. Taking a loaf of bread to newcomers or providing shelter for the homeless offers substantive ministry help. Kind actions, however, do not themselves constitute evangelism. Evangelism includes the verbal communication of the gospel. Would it not be a cruel gesture to offer to wash someone's car and fail to tell them about the Water of Life? To give a light bulb without telling of the Light of the world? To clean a toilet without telling about the only One who can cleanse a person's heart from sin? Failing to tell

people the truth, including the truth about sin and judgment, when the opportunity avails itself is actually cruel.

### **Our Lord's Example**

Scripture abounds with examples of Jesus modeling servanthood and kindness in evangelism. For instance, in John 4, Christ overlooks the obvious taboos of his day to reach out to a Samaritan woman needing the Water of Life. Although conventional wisdom dictated that Christ should have avoided any contact with the woman to guard against religious defilement, He nevertheless chose to converse with the woman. Such kindness presented the opportunity for personal evangelism. Sadly, the disciples remained clueless to Jesus' intent in this situation. In the end, because of Christ's overwhelming love and commitment to the principles of servanthood, the woman was compelled to bring multitudes of others to meet the Savior. Aside from the story of the Samaritan woman in the Gospel of John, consider Jesus feeding the 5,000 (John 6), or Jesus' act of publicly forgiving and receiving the woman caught in adultery (John 8). The most obvious example of servanthood is the washing of the disciples' feet (John 13). It is instructive that this act of servanthood (washing the disciples' feet), occurred only a short time before the supreme act of servanthood—Christ dying on the cross for the redemption of mankind.

In his Gospel account, Matthew describes the ministry of Jesus as being a ministry of preaching, teaching, and healing. This threefold ministry—preaching the good news of the kingdom, teaching about himself, and performing acts of kindness and servanthood—are the defining characteristics of Christ's earthly ministry (see Matt 4:23; 9:35). Through his

acts of kindness and servanthood, the Lord found openings to share the good news, resulting in the salvation of many.

### **Strengths of Servant Evangelism for Reaching a Postmodern World**

Much has been written about the rapid shift from a modernist world to the emerging culture of postmodernism.<sup>3</sup> We live in a day that is relativistic, experiential, and individualized. Without going into a detailed explanation of postmodernism, the following examples describe how servant evangelism can help us reach unchurched postmoderns.

First, postmoderns often need a demonstration of the gospel to accompany the explanation of its message. Postmoderns are less likely to say, "Can you prove it?" when confronted with truth claims. They are more likely to ask, "Can you live it?" Because of the failure of believers to live genuinely changed lives, postmoderns have rejected Jesus, but not because they know of him. They have not rejected Jesus; they have rejected a caricature of him. For some, their concept of Christianity needs to be changed. Demonstrating the love of God through servant evangelism has an amazingly softening effect on the unchurched. On a mission trip to New Hampshire, I took a group of students to a park to give away free sodas and share Christ. A group of skeptical students were so impressed by this group of believers from North Carolina that they continued to come back to talk to us. As a result, six unchurched students gave their lives to Christ over a three-day period.

For others, a simple deed of kindness helps to build rapport. Billy Graham has said that this is an unseeded generation. We should never minimize the place of harvesting. But you can add without sub-

tracting. Jesus called us to be fishers of men, and we should enjoy both fishing *and* catching! Evangelism in a postmodern culture, marked by relationships over reason and experience over argument, requires a heart-to-heart demonstration as well as a head-to-head presentation. In other words, the verbal message is linked to a demonstration of compassion. Thus meeting a simple need prepares the way for sharing the greatest need of all, personal salvation through Jesus Christ.

Along the same lines, servant evangelism is easily contextualized within the changing landscape of postmodernism. In a culture that is conditioned to ask, “What have you done for me lately?” this approach helps to define properly the nature of Christ to a new generation of people searching for answers to significant questions pertaining to God and eternity. Regardless of the cultural context, people are naturally open to the display of servanthood.

Second, postmoderns need personal contact, and servant evangelism puts witnesses in the middle of the culture. Of all the places you might encounter unchurched postmoderns, your church is not one of them. Getting them to church will not get the job done. We must take Jesus to them. We have to go where they live, play, and work. Servant evangelism is useful because all church members can participate, whether the ministry is group car washes, offering sodas at a park, raking leaves, or shoveling snow. Thereby the body of Christ can be on mission together in the community—what a novel thought! Regardless of age, spiritual gifts, or experience, everyone can share in the glorious experience of personal evangelism.

In the spring of 2000, over two hundred members of the First Baptist Church of

Charlotte, North Carolina, went into the city to practice servant evangelism. Teams took cookies to the fire stations, batteries for smoke detectors to homes, and light bulbs to apartment complexes. As a result, several met the Lord, a vibrant apartment ministry began, and the church experienced a heightened concern for reaching the lost.

Third, postmoderns do not want to speak to experts—they want to see real people. Slick sales pitches fail to impress this generation. They want to see real, raw, undiluted truth. So-called reality TV captivates this generation, because shows like *Survivor* take everyday people, not high profile actors, and make them the stars. Servant evangelism allows regular believers, who lack flashy communication skills, an extroverted personality, or multiple hours of training, to tell the good news. This approach redirects one’s focus on the true Lord of the harvest, our great Heavenly Father.

Service evangelism does not remove the need to train believers to witness, but it sensitizes believers to the needs of people, which such training itself does not provide. It can also make the training that believers receive more practical by giving them more opportunities to practice what they have learned. This approach helps believers to get out of the sanctuary into reality. Some people are terrified to witness. Yet, they can certainly wash a car! Furthermore, anyone can hand out a light bulb, give away balloons or popsicles, or clean a car windshield! This allows the timid to learn from watching others.

One seminary student took his youth group to give free car washes. People were amazed that the group would not even take donations! While there, the youth pastor led a man to Christ. This did more

to energize a group of formerly fearful teenagers to witness than anything he had tried. The old cliché still rings true—evangelism is caught more than taught. Actually, evangelism is taught by being caught!

Over a period of time, servant evangelism allows shy people to learn by watching more bold witnesses in action. You can take Christians who would not witness to a teddy bear and let them do the physical work of car washing or yard mowing. They can gain confidence by simply watching two or three trained witnesses gently, yet effectively, communicate the good news.

Fourth, postmoderns need to see the New Testament Church in action. Jesus revealed the church's mission in the Great Commission of Matthew 28. A practical way to fulfill this Commission in a local church is the Total Penetration of a community through Total Participation of the membership.<sup>4</sup> And, as Acts 1:8 demonstrates, God expects his people to claim responsibility for their local communities before expanding their circle of influence to other points of concern. With this in mind, let's consider the basic question, "How do we see them?" "Them," of course, refers to the unsaved world. There are basically three responses to this question. First, many Christians willfully choose to *evade* the unsaved. This is a safe response. After all, if a Christian never encounters a lost person, they feel very little responsibility for the person's eternal condition. This lack of concern manifests itself in the failure of many Christians to demonstrate belief in the gospel by sharing it. As a result, the reason many postmoderns fail to believe the gospel is that they are not sure *we* really believe it.

Second, there are some Christians who choose to *pervade* the unsaved community.

Armed with an oversized leather bound Bible and the proverbial soapbox, these individuals prefer the message of condemnation over compassion. As a result, there is very little meaningful contact with the unsaved. Healthy dialogue is usually sacrificed on the altar of legalistic dogmatism.

The most biblical response leads the church to *invade* communities with the gospel message. Did not Jesus invade the world, leaving heaven to become the Incarnate Word? The church is challenged to become the incarnate reflection of Christ by *invading* the world with the powerful message of servanthood, hope, love, and genuine redemption. In this response, the church is compelled into the world, not to be influenced negatively by it, but to become mirrors of God's glory and to lead the unsaved to a relationship with Christ.

Consider for a moment that people in every community will think about God at some point in their life. When they do, let them think of a church that is in the community, sharing and showing the gospel. This is the power of servanthood!

### **Strengths of Servant Evangelism for Believers**

Besides being effective for reaching unchurched postmoderns, this approach has many benefits for the church. Individual believers can be inspired and involved in fulfilling the Great Commission. First, it is fun! Certainly mature believers should understand that they serve Christ not because it is fun, but because it is essential. God's ultimate priority is not to make an individual *happy*, but to make him or her *holy*.

That being said, the notion of Christianity as a lifestyle devoid of fun stands as a

indictment against the modern church. The idea of having a good time while witnessing is unbelievably liberating. Why do some churches give up a Sunday evening of worship to hold Super Bowl parties (ostensibly to present Christ), but act as though witnessing at other times is at best a burden? Ask any group of believers about the most enjoyable part of their lives, and few will put evangelism at the top of the list. Yet, what could be more fulfilling than helping a lost soul experience the new birth? The truth is that many believers feel a tremendous sense of guilt and even shame because they know that they are living in disobedience to God's command to share the gospel. Unfortunately, many of these same believers have been conditioned to view the church as irrelevant or boring and evangelism as the ultimate form of drudgery and punishment.

Nevertheless, attitudes can be changed. Servant evangelism cuts into the believer's life with the double-edged sword of fun and effectiveness. Few things are more exciting in ministry than to see a group of students or laypeople washing cars, sharing the gospel, getting wet, and honoring Christ all in one afternoon!

Second, servant evangelism involves everyone in evangelism, including families. While one person may do the witnessing, everyone takes part in the experience. The person pumping gas or washing a windshield is praying as another witnesses. The same is true for those who prepare gift packages or baked goods to be delivered door-to-door to prospects.

In a very real way, servant evangelism provides the opportunity for every believer to contribute in a significant manner to the outreach of God's kingdom. As

Paul states in 1 Corinthians 3:6, "I planted, Apollos watered, but God brought the increase." The church cannot afford to allow God's army to sit "at ease" any longer. There must be an active mobilization of the troops. Servant evangelism is an effective and flexible means of achieving this goal.

This is especially true in relation to families being involved together in the ministry of evangelism. In a day when it seems that meaningful family activities are increasingly absent from the home, servant evangelism provides a creative arena that involves every member of the family regardless of age, personality, or spiritual gift. For example, while a five-year-old child may not be able to fully explain the gospel message, he can certainly pass-out sodas at the store or go along with dad and mom as they give away light bulbs door-to-door in their neighborhood. In the end, the family has a great time of fellowship and fun as each individual is reminded about his Great Commission responsibilities.

Third, servant evangelism follows the model of Jesus. Preaching, teaching, and healing encompassed the basic ministry of Jesus as he made his way to the cross and his eventual glorification through the resurrection. Along the way, however, Jesus earmarked his ministry with the stamp of servanthood and obedience to the Father. In his own words, he reminds us in Matthew 20:28 that ". . . the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."

Jesus boldly preached a message of repentance and redemption, while demonstrating the life of a servant. The truth of the gospel spreads more effectively through the vehicle of a servant's life.

Fourth, servant evangelism allows laypeople to use their creativity to initiate ministry opportunities. Imagine for a moment a multitude of laypeople in your church that are genuinely excited about evangelism. These people are not only participating in predesigned servant evangelism projects, they are actually taking leadership team positions and utilizing their creativity to initiate new approaches to servant evangelism. One of the greatest benefits of servant evangelism is its potential for motivating lay people not only to join in existing projects, but also to think of new ways to communicate Christ. For example, two men at Faith Baptist Church in Wake Forest, North Carolina, bought materials from a store to clean rest rooms, then asked to clean that same store's toilets!

Another creative idea came from the wife of a new mission pastor in Indiana, who gave away small packages of Folger's coffee attached to convenient door hangers, together with invitations to an evangelistic coffee house meeting on Saturday evenings. Furthermore, the same congregation canvassed the crowd at a city-wide parade and gave away packages of M&M's with a small card containing information about the mission's activities. You could say that they were just trying to create a sweet taste to mirror their sweet fellowship! As a result, the new congregation gained valuable prospects and much needed community exposure and contacts. After only a few months, the mission baptized several new converts and had an average attendance of about fifty people.

The most exciting aspect of servant evangelism for me is the impact it has on students in the church. Young people love it! A student minister who teaches and

involves his youth in sharing Christ is giving them one of the most valuable lessons possible. I have been involved in youth events where dozens of teens went into the culture to witness by cleaning toilets, giving away baked bread, etc. When the time came to finish witnessing, the students gave up their free time in order to continue. A new breed of young people is now emerging, and this has been evident for about three years. Recent observers are coming to a consensus that a fresh wind is blowing in the coming generation. Hopefully, leaders in the church will not fail to put this new, passionate generation to work in the gospel fields.<sup>5</sup>

Fifth, servant evangelism takes very few resources and can thus be done anywhere in any setting. You might buy a few light bulbs, sodas, or cleaning supplies. You could also begin by determining what you already have and using it to minister to the community. Remember, we are talking about the basics of intentional evangelism coupled with a servant mentality. Again, how much does it cost to be kind?

A good example of this occurred during a mission trip to Croatia. After arriving, the mission team became keenly aware that the Croatian churches had nothing planned for them to do. Thus, the team decided to try cross-cultural servant evangelism, even though only one team member had prior experience in servant evangelism. The mission team purchased light bulbs and gave them out door-to-door with the message that Jesus is the light of the world. Others washed several hundred windshields in the local market. With each act of service, they gave out a card in the Croatian language stating, "We hope this brightens your day as we share the love of Jesus in a practical way."

When the Croatian believers joined in

the act, the servant evangelism projects ended up yielding more than 1,000 community contacts and approximately 150 professions of faith. Three of these decisions came during a follow-up visit to the home of a local bartender. A member of the mission team delivered some danishes to his home and spent several hours sharing his faith. The bartender, his wife, and best friend met Christ.

Sixth, servant evangelism is winsome. A survey of students at Southeastern Seminary employing servant evangelism over a two week period demonstrated that servant evangelism resulted in twice as many opportunities to share the gospel than more traditional approaches. Please note, this does *not* mean that traditional approaches do not work.

Intensive studies have revealed that effective evangelistic churches often utilize door-to-door visitation, evangelistic surveys, assignment visitation, and a variety of other intentional means by which to share the gospel with the unsaved. In no way does servant evangelism have to replace any of these more traditional evangelistic approaches. Again, add without subtracting.

Servant evangelism can enhance these and other approaches. After all, many of the servant evangelism projects are designed for door-to-door implementation. Nevertheless, considering the small percentage of Christians who regularly share their faith, much less participate in week-to-week church outreach activities, it does appear that servant evangelism has the potential of becoming a *better* means of mobilizing and motivating the entire church to reach out to their community.

### **Foundational Principles for Servant Evangelism**

Anything with so much potential for good also has the potential for misuse and even harm.

Therefore, three foundational principles must be understood. First, participants must be intentionally evangelistic. The legacy of theological liberalism leads some to limit themselves to changing society and meeting physical needs. Those who desire to change society must not withhold the redeeming message of Christ. Always look for opportunities to give a verbal witness. Often a person may ask, "Why are you doing this?" Your response should be to share a personal testimony and present a gospel witness. While it is true that you may not get the opportunity to witness on every occasion, if you look for opportunities to share the remedy for mankind's greatest ill, rest assured that God will give you divine appointments.

Second, those participating must genuinely care about people. In our success-driven society, even the church and its leaders can become more motivated by numerical increases in baptisms, church membership, and offerings, than by the potential transformation of human life by the saving message of the gospel. People are not stupid. They can tell whether you really care for them. Moreover, Jesus our Lord expects us to have genuine compassion. In Matthew 9:35-38, Jesus is described as having compassion on the multitudes because "they were distressed and downcast like sheep without a shepherd." He then moves immediately to the subject of the harvest and the need for disciples who could work in his harvest fields. One implication is that his disciples who work in his fields should share his compassion for the lost. Indeed, servant evangelism practiced without genuine

compassion for people is nothing more than a Christianized version of the old “bait and switch.”

Third, eventually, all participants need training. One of the beauties of servant evangelism is that it does not require one to be a witnessing expert. In fact, because it is such a great entry-level approach to personal evangelism where anyone can take an active role, a person can actually participate on a servant evangelism team without having been an active witness in the past. Nevertheless, in order to remain intentionally focused on pure evangelism, it is imperative that each group or pair include someone who can lead people to Christ. This also provides a perfect mentoring opportunity as the inexperienced participants can learn how to witness through watching and listening to others.

Eventually, it is suggested that every active participant should receive training on developing and using their personal testimony and on giving a simple gospel presentation. The new booklet that accompanies the *Net* training, which shares the gospel from the perspective of one’s story, is a great new example. I have used the *Eternal Life* or the *Steps to Peace with God* tracts with great effectiveness in conducting servant evangelism.

Fourth, never underestimate the role of prayer. Spiritual resources are required for spiritual activity. Penetrating the unchurched world of postmodernism will take more than a good strategy. Any project, from a car wash to a laundromat, should be steeped in prayer. Actually, one way to practice servant evangelism involves prayer. Simply enlist a group of people to go to an area and ask those they encounter for any prayer requests. The witnesses can record the requests to take

to the church prayer ministry. They can stop and pray for the need at that moment, and from that need seek to share Christ. I have learned that simply asking waitresses in restaurants for prayer requests opens the door for ministry.

I can summarize the impact of servant evangelism by illustrating how it helped to overcome the frustration of our inability to impact the local high school in Wake Forest. For years Southeastern students had made virtually no impact on the school, even though it lay next door to our seminary. Finally, I took a class to hand out sodas on our property to the students as they dismissed at the end of the day. That practice has continued on a more regular basis. As a result, several students have met Christ, Christian students and teachers have been encouraged, and the principal has been extremely open to our efforts. Why? Because we have demonstrated the simplest kindness to students, because we have been courteous in our witness, and because we have simply been there to meet and talk to students. Simply adding kindness to the gospel—what an original thought!

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Much of this article has been adapted from Alvin L. Reid and David Wheeler, *Servanthood Evangelism* (Atlanta: North American Mission Board, 2000). Used by permission.

<sup>2</sup> See Steve Sjogren, *Conspiracy of Kindness* (Ann Arbor: Servant Books, 1993).

<sup>3</sup> See Jimmy Long, *Generating Hope: A Strategy for Reaching the Post-Modern Generation* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1997); Leonard Sweet, *Soul Tsunami* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999); Donald A. Carson, *The Gagging of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996);

Donald A. Carson, ed., *Telling the Truth*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000).

<sup>4</sup> See Darrell Robinson, *Total Church Life* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1996).

<sup>5</sup> See Thom Rainer, *The Bridger Generation* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1997); Neil Howe and William Strauss, *Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation* (New York: Vintage Books, 2000); and Alvin L. Reid, *Light the Fire: Raising up a Generation of Students to Live Radically for Jesus* (Enumclaw, Washington: Winepress Publishing, 2001). Rainer's book assesses what he calls the "bridger" generation (also called millennials, echo boomers, and Generation Y) from an Evangelical perspective. Howe and Strauss offer a secular perspective on this group, with encouraging assessments. My book is written for teenagers, challenging them to live radically for Christ.