

“Randy Newman has done it again! His latest book on personal evangelism is so captivating and inspirational that I read it in one sitting.”

—**Dr. Lyle Dorsett**, Billy Graham Professor of Evangelism at
Beeson Divinity School, Samford University

“This book left me confident in God’s creative ability to reach into difficult souls and woo them to the Savior. The stories of how real people encounter Jesus remind us that God’s work is a symphony. Different movements in the music move different people at opportune times. Newman’s instructive comments amount to an ‘on the job’ apprenticeship in evangelism. God continues to work in even the most unlikely places.”

—**Gregory E. Ganssle**, professor of philosophy at Talbot School
of Theology and author of *Our Deepest Desires*

“Looking for an infusion of hope and faith? Read Randy Newman’s *Unlikely Converts* and you will be joyfully surprised. First that those you’d least expect can come to saving faith in Jesus Christ, and second that God can use your prayers, life, and words to make the gospel known. Full of amazing stories of God’s pursuit of the lost and practical real-life application, Newman’s warmth, humor, and storytelling make this an enjoyable and powerful read that you’ll want to share with others.”

—**Dr. Joel S. Woodruff**, president of The C. S. Lewis Institute

“In the course of my ministry, I have benefited enormously from Randy Newman’s insights into evangelism. *Unlikely Converts* is another delightful read. If you want to be freshly amazed at God’s power in the salvation of sinners, instructed in sharing the gospel with courage and clarity, and encouraged to faithfulness in your calling as an ambassador for Christ . . . this is the book for you!”

—**Mike McKinley**, pastor of Sterling Park Baptist Church and
author of *Am I Really a Christian?*

“This book will be a massive help to me as I train my church family for evangelism in the twenty-first century. Why do I trust Randy Newman like no one else? First, I trust his theology: he knows the gospel is that Jesus is Lord. Second, I trust his anthropology: he knows how it feels during evangelism to be human and afraid. Third, I trust his historical and cultural engagement: he gets where we are at. And lastly, I trust his experience: he’s been immersed in evangelism with coworkers, family, and friends for over thirty years. I am so grateful to God for this great gift to the church.”

—**Rico Tice**, senior minister of evangelism at All Souls Church, London, and coauthor of *Christianity Explored*

“We need this book. Not because its author is a gospel guru, but because he’s so much like us: a timid evangelist. Randy Newman writes that he can’t remember sharing the gospel without fear, but that hasn’t stopped his mouth or iced his heart. Few combine the heart for the lost, the patient ear, and the tongue of grace like Randy. He shows us how to let our speech always be gracious while still feeling unceasing anguish about hell-bound friends and family made in God’s image. Let a brother who knows reluctance help you walk faithfully forward in yours.”

—**David Mathis**, executive editor at Desiring God, pastor of Cities Church, Minneapolis/St. Paul, and author of *Habits of Grace*

Unlikely Converts

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Questioning Evangelism

Corner Conversations

Bringing the Gospel Home

Engaging with Jewish People

Unlikely Converts

IMPROBABLE STORIES OF FAITH
AND WHAT THEY TEACH US
ABOUT EVANGELISM



Randy Newman

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Publications

Unlikely Converts: Improbable Stories of Faith and What They Teach Us About Evangelism

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*Dedicated
to the memory of my father,
Marty Newman,
a most unlikely convert
who came to faith in the Messiah
a few short years before his death at age ninety*

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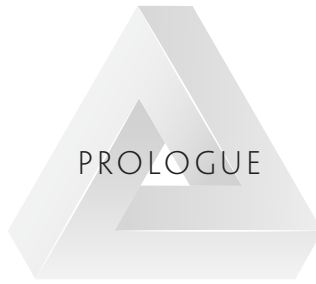
My good friend Diane Boucher spent seemingly hundreds of hours transcribing the interviews and told me many times how thankful she was for the front-row seat to such marvelous stories. She deserves a PhD in servanthood.

Many friends prayed me through the process of research and writing and kept reminding me of God's call to put into writing the stories I'd heard. I'm surrounded by supportive friends at our community group from McLean Presbyterian Church and my co-laborers in the gospel at The C. S. Lewis Institute.

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Most of all, I'm thankful for my wife, Pam, and her patience and

love throughout the writing of this book, the seminary work that preceded it, and all the days of our marriage. She believed in me when I had doubts, listened to me brainstorm ideas (both good and ridiculous), and celebrated many milestones along the way. By God's grace, we still make each other laugh a lot.



Don't you just love stories? We sit on the edge of our seats to hear them. We download podcasts that feature them. We pay money to hear comedians tell funny ones. We wake up when a longwinded speaker breaks from explanations, elaborations, and emendations and says, "This reminds me of a story."

Stories form the backbone of this book. I retell how individuals' narratives intersect with the grandest story of all—the gospel. Allow me to begin with one of my favorites. It's about Lawrence and the pigs. If I were a betting man, I wouldn't have put a lot of money on Lawrence's ever attending a Bible study. In fact, I would have wagered against his ever going to *anything* connected with faith or God or the Bible. Like all the people I write about in this book, Lawrence was an unlikely candidate for a Christian convert. But in his freshman year in college, Lawrence did go to an event where students could ask "some Bible expert" any question they wanted. Lawrence went because he heard there'd be pizza. And the girl who invited him gave out cookies to anyone who said they'd come.

He had virtually no church background to speak of. When he filled out the part of his college application that asked for his religion, he had to ask his mother what he should write. She told him, "Methodist," and that's what he wrote, although he had no idea what that meant. His mother had taken him to church a few times, but he doubted whether God existed. When I asked him how he would describe himself as he began college, he offered the words "lonely, angry, and apathetic."

So he went to the ask-the-expert event to be "obnoxious" and "have fun" and to try to show the speaker that the Christian faith had "obvious issues." What he remembers most was that the speaker

and the Christians were nice to him even though he “was being really mean.” He asked the speaker, “What about aliens? What does that mean for Christianity?” The speaker responded brilliantly, admitting he didn’t know much about aliens, that he didn’t think their existence would affect Christianity all that much, and that if Lawrence wanted to know about Christianity, he should attend the eight-week study of the gospel of Mark that would start the next week.

So Lawrence went, with an attitude of “whatever” (a word he used a lot during the first fifteen minutes of our conversation). He asked many questions during those eight weeks and was impressed that the leader answered thoughtfully and respectfully. He learned a lot about God’s righteousness and his own sinfulness. For a few weeks, he was baffled about how “unfair” it was for Jesus to pay for his sins. But he found himself believing more and more as the weeks passed.

At one point in our conversation, I asked him if there were any major objections or questions that needed resolution. Was there a significant roadblock, I wondered, that, once removed, would pave the way for belief? He paused and shook his head no. But then he remembered and said, “Well . . . the thing that stands out in my head mostly . . . was about the pigs and Jesus casting the demons into the lake.”

I must confess. At that point, I wanted to say, “Really? That tripped you up? Even if I wasn’t Jewish with my innate disdain for pork, I’m not sure that’s what would hold me back from God’s offer of eternal life.” I tried to clarify by asking, “What was your question about the pigs?”

His answer didn’t help me much. “What the heck was that? Jesus just killed all those pigs? They didn’t do anything.” But then he just started laughing and made a face that seemed to say, “That story makes no sense.” So I asked him how the leader answered his question, and Lawrence’s laughter came to a sudden stop. He told me the Bible study leader took his question seriously and started by admitting that he wasn’t sure. That impressed Lawrence as humble and sincere. And then he suggested there really must be some things that are evil, that we shouldn’t mess around with demons, and there must be a big difference between being a pig and being a person.

I asked him if that satisfied him and he said it did. “I was amazed that he had an answer,” he said and added, “people I had dealt with before in churches that I had been to didn’t know how to handle the Bible.” They just told him to believe in Jesus and stop asking all his questions. That didn’t sit well with a fairly intelligent guy, and so he dismissed Christianity as a stupid person’s religion. However, a thoughtful answer about pigs persuaded Lawrence that there probably were good answers for his other questions.

There’s much more to his story, a beautiful and gradual one that included a lot more Bible studies, a major conference for Christian students, attending a good church where people *did* know how to handle the Bible, and a lot of conversations where he learned more and more about Jesus’s “unfair” sacrifice for sinful people like Lawrence.

His experience highlights at least four important lessons:

First, the process of coming to Christ takes time. While God certainly can work instantaneously, most often he does not. People tend to come to faith gradually.

Second, God uses a large and diverse cast of ordinary people to accomplish his extraordinary purposes. People tend to come to faith communally.

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People’s stories reveal a tapestry of experiences,  
struggles, realizations, and transformations.

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Third, layers of dramas lie beneath the surface. People’s stories reveal a tapestry of experiences, struggles, realizations, and transformations. People tend to come to faith variously.

Fourth, nothing is too difficult for God. He can and does draw people to himself miraculously. People *always* come to faith supernaturally.

My conversation with Lawrence was part of the dissertation research I conducted toward my doctorate. Hearing his story was just

one of forty deeply moving and exciting experiences I had along the way. I know: we don't usually expect the words "dissertation" and "exciting" to appear within a thousand paragraphs of each other. But as I heard from recent converts about how God worked to transfer them from the domain of darkness to the realm of saving light, I went through a lot of tissues. I have since listened to several other conversion stories that weave their way into this book.

We Need Help Telling Our Story

I'm convinced that hearing people's stories can help us proclaim the gospel more fruitfully. Through this book, I hope to encourage you in that task. But let's be realistic—evangelism has never been easy, and that's not likely to change. Consider this scenario:

You've got new neighbors. And your pastor has convinced you to invite them to church. What could be a kinder gesture of "Welcome to the neighborhood" than an invitation to worship together? But you don't know if they're Christians. In fact, you'd almost bet they're not. You remember attending a training seminar years ago about how to present the gospel concisely, clearly, boldly, and sooner rather than later. Even though you cling firmly to the truth that people are lost apart from Christ, somehow, that all seems unhelpful at this moment.

You wonder what to say after "Hello" and before "Are you ready to become a Christian?" Most of us might think, "Oh, there's so much you can say." But we quickly admit we're not sure where to begin. This book aims to help with that task. Some refer to this as "pre-evangelism." I love that term, but to be honest, it's too vague because that can be a huge continuum. I hope this book clears up that vagueness, explores the many varieties of pre-evangelism, and offers specific strategies for knowing what to say, how to say it, when to build plausibility, which obstacles to overcome, and why a gradual approach may be better than saying everything at once.

Our World Needs Our Story

Our world has shifted dramatically in the past decade. Our old strategies for evangelism need significant retooling. Even in the few years

since I wrote *Questioning Evangelism* (2004), our audience has moved further away from what used to be valid starting points of conversation.

Here's how I envision our current situation. Not long ago I was watching a hockey game and found myself equally enjoying the athletic skills of the players and the verbal dexterity of the announcer. He crafted sentences as brilliantly and spontaneously as the athletes passed and shot that tiny black disc while skating close to breakneck speed.

At one point the contest was horribly lopsided, with one team unable to clear the puck out of their zone for more than two minutes, an eternity in the world of hockey. The announcer screamed, "Here's another shot turned away by the goalie. But they can't clear. And now a slap shot from the point. Save. But they can't control the rebound. Here's another scorcher that goes wide. I can't believe it. They get a fifth shot in as many seconds. Finally the goalie hangs on and we get a break." And then he added, "It seems that the ice is tilted!"

Can you picture that? Tilted ice for a hockey game? Play with that image for just a moment. The two hockey teams come out of their respective locker rooms to skate around and warm up on the ice before the game. They notice, however, before stepping onto the playing surface, that one team is going to have a mammoth advantage over the other. The rink slants downhill in their favor. The other team will have to skate, pass, and shoot uphill.

If you can go with this bizarre illustration, I think you'll agree the teams (both of them since they switch sides after each period) should not even begin to play until the ice gets untilted.

In our world today, evangelistically speaking, the ice is tilted. And Christians are on the downhill side of the playing surface. Non-Christians feel like they have the upper hand—both intellectually and morally. We have work to do to untilt the ice before we start the "game" of evangelism. Pre-evangelism untilts the ice.

We've been moving in this post-Christian direction for quite some time. In fact, I believe the shift is woven into the very foundation of

American history. We're all familiar with this line in the Declaration of Independence: "We hold these truths to be self-evident . . ." But did you know that Thomas Jefferson's earlier draft of that phrase read, "We hold these truths to be sacred and undeniable"? It was Benjamin Franklin who bristled at the obviously religious flavor of that phrase. "Using heavy backslashes, he crossed out the last three words of Jefferson's phrase . . . and changed it to read: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident.'"¹ The very trajectory of America's national identity pointed toward self-autonomy and away from submission to God.

We need to realize that time deepens the problem. I believe we can see cultural, spiritual parallels to physicist Max Planck's observations about science: "A new scientific truth does not triumph by convincing its opponents and making them see the light, but rather because its opponents eventually die, and a new generation grows up that is familiar with it."²

Please don't get bogged down in the historical roots or precedents for our current cultural malaise. It has not been a steady slide without major explosions along the way. The 1960s, for instance, provided a cultural earthquake with aftershocks, counterreactions, and reverberations that continue to shake us.

However we got here, as proclaimers of the good news, we need to "understand the times" (cf. 1 Chron. 12:32) and know how to "become all things to all people so that by all possible means [we] might save some" (1 Cor. 9:22). Most people today are not predisposed positively toward the gospel. They're not "ready to receive Christ." Many do not feel all that positive about God. As I heard a comedian put it, "I believe in God but I'm not a fan." Or, as *Atlantic Monthly* journalist Jonathan Rausch confessed, "I used to call myself an atheist and I still don't believe in God, but the larger truth is that it has been years since I really cared one way or another. I'm . . . an apatheist."³

Pre-Evangelism: The Help We Need

Fifty years ago, Francis Schaeffer, the one-of-a-kind preacher and evangelist in postmodern Europe (before most people ever heard the

term *postmodern*) told us, “Pre-evangelism is no soft option.”⁴ More recently, Russell Moore awakened us to the reality that “we can stop counting on the culture to do pre-evangelism” for us.⁵

The fact that Tim Keller felt the need to write a prequel to his book *The Reason for God* illustrates my point. This earlier book answered questions some non-Christians ask. But Keller found that many outsiders weren’t asking any questions. In his preface to *Making Sense of God*, Keller says the former book “does not begin far back enough for many people. Some will not even begin the journey of exploration, because, frankly, Christianity does not seem relevant enough to be worth their while.”⁶

We need to back up and start our evangelistic efforts with more fundamental discussions. I’ve heard people say the difference between Keller’s first book and his more recent *Making Sense of God* is that the first one provides answers for people who have questions. The second one poses questions for people who think they already have answers. The first is for someone already wondering if there are good reasons to become a Christian. The second is for someone who doubts that any good reasons exist.

My prayer is that *Unlikely Converts* will help you know what to say to people, whether they’re asking questions or not.

I’ve lived in the realm of pre-evangelism for quite some time. I came to faith in the Messiah from a secularized Jewish background after more than four years of gradually moving from “Are you crazy? Jews don’t believe in Jesus,” to “Hmm. Maybe I need to consider who that Jewish carpenter was,” to “Don’t tell anyone I’m reading the New Testament,” to “My Lord and my God!” I benefited greatly from patient Christian friends who trusted our sovereign God to move me incrementally at his pace.

I also benefited from reading C. S. Lewis’s *Mere Christianity*, perhaps the greatest model of pre-evangelism ever. When Lewis was asked to put together a series of radio broadcasts to explain the Christian faith to BBC listeners during World War II, he opted to spend the first several episodes on how we know what we know. Long before ever saying a word about God or Jesus or sin or the

cross, he camped out on “right and wrong as a clue to the meaning of the universe.” These brief weekly broadcasts eventually became the written book *Mere Christianity*, which many have called the most influential Christian book of the twentieth century. We now read four or five short chapters one after the other in just a few minutes, but their original presentation allowed for a week’s worth of rumination after suggestive, pre-evangelistic, partial messages such as:

- “Human beings . . . have this curious idea that they ought to behave in a certain way.”⁷
- “They do not in fact behave in that way.”⁸
- “We have cause to be uneasy.”⁹
- “God is our only comfort. He is also the supreme terror: the thing we most need and the thing we most want to hide from.”¹⁰

In a letter to the BBC producers, Lewis explained, “It seems to me that the New Testament, by preaching repentance and forgiveness, always assumes an audience who already believe in the law of nature and know they have disobeyed it. In modern England we cannot at present assume this, and therefore most apologetics begins a stage too far on. The first step is to create, or recover, the sense of guilt. Hence if I gave a series of talks, I shd [*sic*] mention Christianity only at the end, and would prefer not to unmask my battery till then.”¹¹

I came to appreciate Lewis’s approach even more when I began evangelistic ministry on the staff of Campus Crusade for Christ. I served for more than three decades on East Coast urban campuses where the typical evangelistic strategies that worked so well in Midwestern and Southern America didn’t even cause people to blink. I had to learn pre-evangelistic strategies because my audiences didn’t seem to care one whit about having a personal relationship with God.

The Biblical Case for Pre-Evangelism

I’m convinced that pre-evangelism is essential for reaching people with the gospel in postmodern settings today. But perhaps I need to

make my case a bit more persuasively. After all, isn't the gospel self-authenticating and powerful enough on its own? Do we really need to appeal to fallen people's inadequate reasoning in proclaiming a message about rebirth? Perhaps my quoting of Schaeffer, Moore, and Keller still leave you wanting input from a higher authority.

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The Scriptures offer a variety of
preparations for the gospel before
stating the message outright.

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To be sure, proclaiming the gospel is powerful. We trust in the Holy Spirit, who “will prove the world to be in the wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment” (John 16:8) as we do so. But we must notice that the Scriptures offer a variety of preparations for the gospel before stating the message outright.

At this point, I must offer a few definitions. What exactly is evangelism, and how is pre-evangelism distinct from or related to evangelism? We need to be very clear about this. I hear a lot of fuzzy thinking about evangelism, and I'd hate to contribute to that fog. Here's how I am using these terms in this book.

Evangelism is the verbal proclamation of a very specific message: that Jesus died to atone for sins, that he rose from the dead, and that people must respond with repentance and faith. *Pre-evangelism* refers to the many different things that can pave the way for that proclamation. Evangelism and pre-evangelism are related, but we must remember their distinctions.

Sharing your testimony is a great pre-evangelistic strategy—but it's not evangelism. Discussing philosophical arguments for the existence of God may be exactly what you need to do with some skeptics—but it's not evangelism. Admiring beauty in nature or order in the physical universe and asking why our world seems so tailor-made for people is a very good pre-evangelistic tactic (one that I particularly love!)—but it's not evangelism. And digging wells or building houses

or feeding hungry people might serve in pre-evangelistic ways—but that’s not evangelism either.

I get nervous when people tell me they helped their neighbor with a chore around their house and then declare, “That’s the gospel!” No it’s not. It was probably a really great thing to do, and it may have even communicated sacrificial love to the neighbor. It might have even made them wonder why you’re so nice. But until you use words that articulate some very important facts about the cross, you’ve only paved the way for evangelism. You haven’t yet evangelized. We need to maintain the difference.

The distinction between evangelism and pre-evangelism has similarities with the distinction between conversion and the path that leads to that defining experience. Conversion is “our willing response to the gospel call, in which we sincerely repent of sins and place our trust in Christ for salvation.”¹² A long process often precedes conversion. In this book, I will use the phrases “coming to faith” and “faith stories” to include both the specific event of conversion and the many things that lead up to that point.

Here is one significant argument in favor of the value of pre-evangelism: the entire Old Testament is pre-evangelistic. It paves the way for a message that, when finally presented, prompts a response of, “Ohhh. So that’s what we’ve been waiting for!” (I have to wonder if that wasn’t Simeon’s feeling when he saw the infant Jesus in the temple—Luke 2:25–32.)

The first hint at a gospel of a suffering Messiah in Genesis 3:15 is remarkably cryptic and incomplete. God declares, “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.” Who’s crushing whose head? And how does the striking of a heel compare? The text urges the reader to keep reading with the skills of a detective to see how that puzzling prediction will come to fulfillment. The drama of the Old Testament brings a dazzling array of characters onto the stage, prompting us to wonder which one could be the head crusher promised in the garden. The way Eve describes her newborn son makes us think that, just perhaps, he’s the one (Gen. 4:1). But it

doesn't take long for us to see he's no leading character for us to follow. The same can be said about Noah, who "found favor in the eyes of the LORD" (6:8). But he lets us down when he gets drunk (9:21). Might it be Abraham? We doubt it when he lies and says his wife is his sister—twice! (12:10–20; 20:1–12). And on and on it goes with disappointing non-Messiahs, one after another. And so we long for one who won't let us down. Can we not see this pattern of hope and disappointment as a form of pre-evangelism?

The Old Testament does far more to prepare our hearts for the Messiah than simply hint at his suffering; it moves us toward solving the mystery of who he will be. It features characters who act out intriguing dramas that seem to point forward to a main character who will make all the minidramas make more sense. Abraham offers up a son as a sacrifice but has the process halted by a God who provides his own substitute. The text itself lets us know this drama is not finished because it identifies the location as "The LORD Will Provide" (Gen. 22:14). You would have thought it should be called, "The Lord Did Provide." Apparently this drama pointed to a future provision that will be better.

So many examples could be given. One man, David, fights a battle against an enemy, Goliath, so that all who identify with him will be saved. While we could zoom our lens in on David's courage, the story is crafted in such a way that we see God's supernatural miracle as a way of saving his people through an unlikely representative. The Old Testament is filled with types, foreshadowings, predictions, and unfinished stories to prepare us for a message yet to come.

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Sometimes people need to consider ideas  
that pave the way for the core truths of the  
gospel before hearing those propositions.

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Fair enough, you say. The Old Testament is pre-evangelistic. But we live after the cross. Now that the Messiah has come, we simply

need to point to his finished cross-work and reap where the Old Testament has sown. Right? Not quite. The New Testament recounts instances of partial gospel proclamations. It gives us models and templates for pre-evangelism. I'll offer a few here, but I'll elaborate more throughout this book. Consider Jesus's tantalizing offer of "living water" while saving an explanation about atonement, the cross, and forgiveness for later (see John 4:1–39). Or think about Jesus's questions to the rich man that led to a list of commandments (a rather select list at that!) but no discussion of salvation by faith alone (see Mark 10:17–22). Or examine Paul's sermon in Athens, which went for quite a while, meandering into quotes of pagan poets, before saying anything about a resurrection (see Acts 17:16–34). Sometimes people need to consider ideas that pave the way for the core truths of the gospel before hearing those propositions, and the Bible gives us models of what that can look and sound like.

This Book's Approach

You may be surprised to know that I'm not one of those bold evangelists who always shares the gospel with people on airplanes. In fact, as I'm boarding, I often pray for God to provide an empty seat next to me so I can just read or take a nap. When I began serving with The C. S. Lewis Institute, they offered to provide me with business cards with my title as Senior Teaching Fellow for Apologetics and Evangelism. I requested something more C. S. Lewisian: The Most Reluctant Evangelist. They printed their option.

I struggle with evangelism. I've learned a lot from Campus Crusade's founder and president Bill Bright's book *Witnessing Without Fear*. But in my library, because of its title, I shelve that book under Fiction. I can't remember ever witnessing without fear. And for that reason, I believe God uses me in encouraging fellow reluctant evangelists with the task of proclaiming good news when we'd all rather put in earbuds and listen to podcasts.

If I may adapt C. S. Lewis's words from his introduction to *Reflections on the Psalms*, I believe I can help nonevangelists because, like them, I am not an expert. Lewis wrote: "I write for the unlearned

about things in which I am unlearned myself. . . . It often happens that two schoolboys can solve difficulties in their work for one another better than the master can. When you took the problem to a master, as we all remember, he was very likely to explain what you understood already, to add a great deal of information which you didn't want, and say nothing at all about the thing that was puzzling you. . . . The fellow-pupil can help more than the master because he knows less."¹³

I'm hoping my status as "fellow-pupil" can help you reach out to the non-Christians God has sovereignly placed around you. Thankfully, I have found that those of us who are nonevangelists find the components of pre-evangelism more suited to our natures. Some will say we're simply chickening out. And in many instances, perhaps we are. But, putting the matter in the best light, I have seen that in some cases God uses timid nonevangelists in the pre-evangelistic portion of the process, in ways uniquely suited to their gifts and callings.

Brainstorms

Christians often wonder, "What should I say to someone who says . . ." and then they offer a difficult scenario to respond to. They want to know *the* right thing to say that will be impossible to refute. But most of us can't think that quickly or dazzle that powerfully. In fact, I'm not sure that's the best tactic. We want to engage more than amaze.

Brainstorming, I think, is a better way to prepare ourselves for evangelistic and pre-evangelistic conversations. When we try to come up with just one response, it paralyzes us. When we try to come up with a dozen, we end up with two or three good things to say that can work in a variety of situations. Besides, no two questioners are alike. What would make us think that one statement would fit every situation? Coming up with several possible responses prepares us for several possible situations.

Thus, I've suggested some brainstorms at the end of each chapter of this book, to stimulate your thinking. Don't think of these brainstorms as "*the* right way" or "magic bullets." I'm simply trying to

spark your own brainstorming to help you prepare for a variety of opportunities.

An Invitation

I realize the task of evangelism can seem overwhelming. Even with all the nuanced ideas in this book, we can feel intimidated. My aim is to be practical. It's helpful to study philosophy and apologetics and societal trends, but often after reading those books, we wonder, "OK. But what do I say?" This book seeks to answer that question.

I was greatly encouraged to listen to the stories of the recent converts I interviewed. On several occasions, I cried. Quite often, I found myself marveling at how the unlikeliest of stories unfolded. God works in the realm of the impossible. I hope my retelling those stories will embolden you to play your part in the evangelism process and plead with God to do his part.

PART 1

How People Come to Faith

Gradually

A bizarre cult ensnared Joni's parents for most of their lives. Through her first seventeen years, Joni thought their religion was normal. They went to something like a church, sat under convoluted messages from a leader who had convinced his followers he was the messiah. She watched her parents hang on every word, but "it never really made sense" to her.

Part of this cult's practice was for the church's leader to match up men and women to be married. Joni's parents met each other on their wedding day. Their leader determined they would make a good couple and now, twenty-plus years later, they were still together. But Joni said most of the marriages she saw in her church were horrible. Haltingly she told me, "My mom didn't want to be a mom. She didn't enjoy raising kids, and—I definitely felt like I wasn't a source of joy for my parents. I was nothing more than a disappointment to my parents."

Joni began to have horrible visions of her own future when her father began to talk about whom he would match her up with for her marriage partner. (As the church had grown—to over a hundred thousand members worldwide!—marriages were now arranged by parents rather than the leader.) So at age seventeen, Joni ran away from home.

You might think, "Oh good. She got away from that madness." Unfortunately, she ran into different madness—the kind a young, attractive woman often finds in a world filled with a variety of ills. She was sexually exploited, became addicted to various drugs, and moved from one temporary-living mess to another.

Miraculously, she got accepted to a prestigious college with scholarship housing on campus. Dorm life may have been the most stable living situation she ever experienced. It was there that she met some Christians, whose friendliness prompted deeply conflicted feelings.

They were remarkably nice people, but her attitudes toward God and religion were, understandably, quite negative. “My life was ruined by religion,” she told me, with anger in her voice. “It was the thing I resented more than anything else. I had wholly and completely rejected the idea of aligning myself with a certain religion . . . because it was something I very much feared.”

Like so many of the stories I heard, Joni’s path to saving faith progressed gradually.

Being enrolled in a major university allowed Joni to find help from the school’s counseling service. As you can well imagine, she battled depression, anxiety, and other struggles. But it was her newly forming friendships with Christians, she says, that made the biggest difference. They were kind and showed interest in her. She found great friendship in a woman who served as a campus ministry intern. Every time she mentioned her name to me, her face beamed with a delightful smile.

“Our conversations were like an open forum that I never experienced before, where I was allowed to ask questions and state doubts. I was never allowed to do that when I was growing up in my parents’ faith.”

Like so many of the stories I heard, Joni’s path to saving faith progressed gradually. Many conversations with the campus ministry intern, late-night conversations with friends about the Bible, a weekend retreat, listening to sermons at a good church, and writing a lot in her journal moved her along incrementally from resentment to reception.

Telling me about rereading parts of her journal, Joni said, “I

noticed this very gradual shift in my note taking. I was always comparing what I was hearing and what I was learning to what I had been taught in my parents' church." She told how she began to understand why Jesus died on the cross (something her parents' church said was a tragic mistake), that he paid for sins, and that he made people new creatures.

And then, in a moment I'll never forget, she paused and very deliberately stated, "I had done all of these things and made all these mistakes and screwed up on so many levels. And to be totally and wholly forgiven for these things by God was a huge experience for me." Sitting outside a coffee shop with a lot of people walking nearby, she began to cry. So did I. Eventually, tearfully, she whispered, "The word 'gratitude' doesn't even begin to describe it."

"A Very Gradual Shift"

Let's consider Joni's description of her experience—"I noticed this very gradual shift." Many of the people I interviewed echoed her sentiment. Some described it as a series of intellectual realizations. Others described a melting of anger. A few expressed a sadness that "maybe my friends are right and I've been a jerk for the way I've been making fun of them." One guy just laughed as he recounted his embarrassment when he realized that his best arguments against the gospel were lame.

Miles, a lacrosse player at a large university, told me he attended a series of discussions about sex from a biblical perspective that convinced him he should break up with his girlfriend. Actually, he didn't want to break up; he just thought they should stop having sex. She broke up with him when he told her of his decision. After the breakup, he started attending an evangelistic Bible study.

(By the way, that's not what they called it. Wouldn't that be a non-starter: "Hey, you want to attend an evangelistic Bible study?" They called it something like "organic discussion group." Miles couldn't remember the exact title. He just knew they talked a lot about Jesus.)

His progress—over the course of two semesters—could be summarized as follows:

1. “Christians are crazy. They don’t have sex.”
2. “Maybe waiting until you get married to have sex isn’t such a bad idea. But it’s not possible.”
3. “OK. I hate not having sex, but I think it’s the right thing to do.”
4. “I’ve got to think about something other than sex.”
5. “I never knew Jesus said all those things.”
6. “Oh, so *that’s* why Christians make such a huge deal about Easter.”

One night, while eating dinner with his teammates, he found himself defending his decision to not have sex until marriage. They laughed hysterically and blasted him with questions. He told me, as he answered them, he found himself amazed at hearing the words coming out of his mouth. It was while talking to them about sex that he realized he now believed what they taught at the Bible study about Jesus. It was a long, gradual process that culminated in telling others what was occurring inside.

Several campus ministers with whom I’ve worked know this intuitively: coming to faith often occurs gradually. There may have been a time, decades ago, when we could assume, “People are ready to receive Christ; they just have to be invited to make a decision.” I’m not convinced we should have ever assumed that, but most assuredly those days are long gone.

Two long-time campus ministers, Don Everts and Doug Schaupp, wrote an entire book about gradual conversion, breaking the process down into “five thresholds of postmodern conversion.” They said the students moved

1. “from distrust to trust”;
2. then “from complacent to curious”;
3. then “from being closed to change to being open to change in their life”;
4. then “from meandering to seeking”; and,
5. finally, “they needed to cross the threshold of the kingdom itself.”¹

Their observations are quite helpful, and their term “threshold” adequately describes many people’s experiences. But not all. I simply want to tweak their theory to say there may be many varieties of threshold series. Some series have five thresholds; some have three; and some thresholds may not seem as distinct or separate from each other as Everts and Schaupp seem to imply. And for some, “thresholds” might not be the best term at all. For some they’re epiphanies, or discoveries, or surrenders, or embracings, or mini-decisions. The important point is for us to allow for and adapt to a gradual approach in how we help people move along at the pace and prompting of the Holy Spirit.

From A to Z

Here’s one way to think of this. Visualize a line with the alphabet written above it. Consider this a scale of unbelief from A to Z, with A being the hardest atheist you can imagine and Z being someone ready to become a Christian. Every non-Christian we meet fits on that line somewhere.² For people who already believe in God, think the Bible is probably worth listening to, and are already convinced they need forgiveness for some things they’ve done, starting a conversation somewhere around letter T seems best. Helping someone move from T to Z can begin with a question like, “If you were to die tonight, how sure are you that you’d go to heaven?” For someone at letter D, that question might sound bizarre or annoying or incoherent.

Worst of all, the “dying tonight” question might strike some as arrogant or unrealistically confident. Consider *New Yorker* columnist Adam Gopnik’s insight from his introduction to a book about the Bible: “Our ancestors acknowledged doubt while practicing faith. We moderns are drawn to faith while practicing doubt.”³ If he’s right, and I’m pretty sure he is, many of the individuals we meet have more doubt than faith and more questions than answers. They’re more likely to say, “What makes you so sure?” than “Please tell me more.”

We need a variety of starting points for people with a variety of

beliefs. For people at the beginning of the alphabet, letters A through E, we might begin with open-ended questions like “Do you ever think much about spiritual things?” or “Do you like to read? What authors have shaped your thinking the most?” For people in the middle of the alphabet, perhaps letters H through N, we might try “I wonder if you’d ever be interested in coming to a Bible study I go to?” or “Are you guys looking for a church to go to this Christmas?”

As I hope you can surmise, this isn’t an exact science. Wouldn’t it be nice if someone developed an evangelistic app for your phone that would tell you what letter best fits the person you’re talking to? It would pick up vibes from them, analyze their level of gospel receptivity, and then suggest appropriate questions to ask or provocative statements to make. It could serve as an evangelistic Geiger counter!

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If we develop excellent communication skills,  
we can adapt our pre-evangelistic approaches  
to a variety of people with a wide range of  
attitudes or objections to our message.

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A better approach would be to ask questions and listen carefully to people’s responses—both the words they say and the expressions they make. If we develop excellent communication skills, we can adapt our pre-evangelistic approaches to a variety of people with a wide range of attitudes or objections to our message. I believe this is one application of what Paul wrote in his phrase “so that you may know how to answer everyone” at the end of Colossians 4:6. I’ll say more about that important passage in chapter 7.

Biblical Support for Gradual Pre-Evangelism

I’ve already mentioned Paul’s speech on Mars Hill as recorded in Acts 17. Most scholars acknowledge that Luke only gave us highlights of the speech rather than the entire text. In that day, orators spoke for an hour or more in such settings, and Paul’s message probably fit that

pattern.⁴ It is fair to ask the key question, “Was Paul making a big mistake with such a long philosophical argument?” I don’t think he was (and I’ve found support for this interpretation in the majority of evangelical commentaries).

First, it would seem odd, to say the least, that God would inspire his Word to give us something that would take so long to read if Paul shouldn’t have taken so long to say it. Further, the account reads like other records of gospel preaching in Acts, complete with a report of mixed responses. Some sneered, some wanted to hear more, and some believed. In fact, the report about Athens sounds even better than others because we’re given specific names of people who believed. I take it that Luke thought this outreach might have actually been *more* successful than some others. He goes out of his way to tell us that one of the converts, Dionysius, was “a member of the Areopagus,” thus not the most likely of positive responders. Another, Damaris, was a woman, thus someone who had to hear the message second- or thirdhand. (Women were not allowed at such gatherings in that culture.) If anything, Paul’s method of building his case gradually is heralded as brilliant, not mistaken.

We would be wise to copy his example in our day. Our culture resembles Athens (steeped in skepticism and shaped by secularism) far more than Jerusalem (aware of God’s holiness and convinced of people’s sinfulness).

Consider Paul’s approach. He wanted his audience to open up to the reality that we are created to know God and find our meaning in him. He quoted some of their poets to bolster his case: “As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring’” (Acts 17:28). Then notice Paul’s progression of thought. He moved from what they already knew or accepted to what he wanted them to understand and receive.

If he had been preaching in a synagogue in Jerusalem, he might have progressed as follows:

1. God created us in his image. We know this from the Scriptures.
2. He’s not a material god like the ones the Athenians worship.

3. Therefore, we can surmise that we are not merely material beings.
4. We can conclude that we're made to connect spiritually to a spiritual God.

But Paul takes a different route:

1. We are God's offspring. Even your poets recognize this truth.
2. From that, we surmise that we are not merely material beings.
3. Therefore, God is not merely material "like gold or silver or stone" (Acts 17:29).
4. We conclude that we're made to know a personal God in a personal way to fulfill our personal nature.

Whether you follow all the nuances of Paul's lines of argument (or my interpretations of them), I hope you can value his gradual approach. For some conversations, we need to start at the point where we challenge people's assumptions about truth before we proclaim *the* truth. We might need to soften their hardness against the possibility of knowing God before we tell them of the joys of knowing that God. In many, perhaps most conversations, we need to suggest that some parts of our inner being are not what they should be before we proclaim that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23).

G. K. Chesterton followed Paul's example in his influential work *The Everlasting Man*. He spent the first half of that book discussing the nature of man before discussing the nature of one very significant man, "the everlasting man," Jesus. Actually, he backed up even further. Before discussing what we know about people, Chesterton challenged his readers to consider what we know about anything—about ourselves, about truth, and ultimately, about God. In the very introduction he invited his audience to first step outside Christianity by looking at it rationally before stepping inside Christianity and believing it by faith. To use his terms, his approach was "historical rather than theological."⁵

Varieties of Pre-Evangelistic Experiences

So how do we do this? I'll suggest a few ways, with the hope they spark many other ideas.

We believe there is only one way to God, through Jesus's atonement on the cross. Our gospel message is an exclusive one. We take seriously Jesus's uncompromising declaration, "No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). However, there may be many starting points before we get to that exclusive gospel message.

The most straightforward route consists of a protracted gospel presentation with stops along the way to see if people understand what we've said so far. In some instances, it is wise to simply present the gospel concisely and clearly through some form of a four-point outline. We have many versions to choose from but they all tend to rest on four key pillars.

Our message includes two important truths about each of these:

1. God: he's holy and he's loving.
2. People: we're made in God's image, but we've rebelled against him.
3. Jesus: he died a sacrificial death to pay for our sins, and he rose again.
4. How we must respond: with repentance and with faith.

This is easy to memorize and state without taking a lot of time. But each point requires clarification or defense or elaboration. For some people, the sticking point is at the very beginning. If they don't believe in God, the rest of our four-point outline makes little sense. They may say, "This is nice. If I believed in God, I might consider what you're saying. But I don't believe in God. I don't believe in unicorns either." So we might have to stop at point one and engage in a tailor-made conversation before moving on to point two. They may not say anything at all. In those instances, we should ask more questions before simply forging ahead with our pre-scripted, one-size-fits-all soliloquy.

Recently, some have proposed a more narrative four-point outline

for sharing the gospel.⁶ It points people to the story line of the Bible and calls for a response as follows:

1. Creation: The world we live in was created by a personal God who designed it as good, orderly, and beautiful.
2. Fall: People messed that up by rebelling against the Creator.
3. Redemption: God initiated a rescue by sending his Son to redeem and forgive rebellious people and start restoring the original created design.
4. Consummation: Eventually that process will be complete, and all the world will be renewed. Until then, we need to respond to God's offer of rescue by repenting and trusting God to start the renewal process in us.

Both approaches have strengths and weaknesses. The first one (God/People/Jesus/Response) has the strength of emphasizing our problem and the need for each individual to respond. But it can seem totally individualistic without any concern for the rest of the world. The second approach (Creation/Fall/Redemption/Consummation) fits more with the shape of the Bible as God has inspired it, but it can seem less urgent to individuals. It might seem nice to join God in his project to clean up the planet but not necessary for us to escape God's wrath.

Matt Chandler refers to these two presentations as “the gospel on the ground” and “the gospel in the air.” He makes a convincing case that both can be used effectively to help lost people find salvation. “Both are necessary in order to begin to glimpse the size and the weight of the good news, the eternity-spanning wonderment of the finished work of Christ. Both are necessary so that we are not reductionistic in how we define what God is up to both in our hearts and in the universe around us.”⁷

Here are a few routes of pre-evangelism worth exploring.⁸ I heard some of these woven into the faith stories of my interviewees. I encourage you to experiment with them. I'm going to state these as concisely as possible for the sake of helping you grasp them.

When you craft a conversation (or, better yet, a series of conversations) around these lines, you'll want to move slowly. Think of these as road maps. It's important to look at a map before you drive from New York to Los Angeles to get the plan in your head. You can usually grasp it in just a few minutes. But actually making the drive will take a bit longer.

Note that these are not gospel presentations as the two examples above were. Rather, these merely prepare the way for a gospel presentation.

Route 1: Not That, nor That, but This

This approach can be very helpful when addressing the issue of *identity*.

- In what could be called “traditional cultures,” people tend to build their identities on others. What your parents or your ethnic community or group of friends believe about you shapes how you think of yourself.
- In what might be called “modern cultures,” people build their identities on themselves—their values, their goals, their gender, their passion, etc. As a bumper sticker expresses it, “Life isn’t about finding yourself. Life is about creating yourself.”
- Both of these approaches have problems.
 - Building your identity on others leads to insecurity, instability, guilt, shame, condemnation, or an insatiable need to please an ever-morphing audience.
 - But building your identity from within is confusing. (Which parts of yourself do you use, and which do you ignore?) Or it can be destructive. (If you’re honest, when you look inside, you see a mix of good and bad. Building your life on some of your desires could ruin your life.) It can also be crushing if you can’t live up to the standards you set for myself. And it can be downright depressing as you grow older and diminish in the ability to even come close to your goals, dreams, and hopes.

- But if you build your identity on someone who will
 - hold you to the highest standards, even higher than the ones you set for yourself,
 - while accepting and loving you when you fail by providing forgiveness and cleansing,
 - and give you a new identity that's better than one you could construct for yourself . . .
 that would be an identity worth having.

Route 2: Tension and Release

This approach can be very helpful when addressing the issue of *evil and suffering*.

- There's a lot of good in our world—beauty in nature, captivating music, intriguing works of art, etc.
- There's also a lot of ugliness—death, disease, decay, etc.
- We see both good and bad in people.
- We see both good and evil in ourselves. (Sometimes I say nice things to people; sometimes I'm glad people can't read my mind.)
- This conflict between good and bad can point us to God. He made our world good and he made us to know him and his goodness. But something has obviously gone wrong.
- We want to know this God sometimes, but at other times, we would rather he leave us alone.
- This creates a tension. Something inside us longs for resolution. We want to know the beauty and we want God to punish evil.
- The cross satisfies God's goodness and his judgment.

Route 3: Yes, but No, but Yes

This approach can be helpful when addressing the issue of *sexuality*.

- There are a lot of things in life that are really great. One might even call them “blessings.”
- One really great thing is sex. It's pleasurable and profound.
- Yes, there's good reason why we value sex so much.

- But no, it cannot be the most important thing in life. It's a good gift but it's not a good god. (A lot of elaboration or explanation could be inserted here.)
- If we have God as the ultimate priority in our lives, his gifts fit in well. He's the one who designed sex to be as pleasurable and as profound as it is—or as it can be.
- Yes, sex can be what God wants it to be in our lives—if we get our priorities right.

Route 4: What If . . .

This approach can be very helpful when addressing the issue of *desires or longings*.⁹

- We all long for something more. It might be more joy or happiness or fun or meaning or significance or many other things.
- We are constantly disappointed.
- There are some things that seem to promise what we're looking for: falling in love, seeing a beautiful sunset, relishing a delicious meal, hearing a mesmerizing piece of music, etc.
- But even these experiences leave us disappointed.
- We could keep chasing other experiences, hoping to find one that doesn't let us down.
- Or we could become cynical and give up hope of ever finding anything more.
- But what if there was satisfaction somewhere? What if we don't have to settle for cynicism? What if the disappointments were never meant to satisfy but were only meant as pointers?
- What if we were meant for another world?

In the advance of God's kingdom . . . we do
play a part, but we're not the main character.
We are part of the process, but we're not
the one who determines the timing.

There are other routes of pre-evangelism to explore. Doing so would require a willingness to experiment and a trust that God is in charge of the process. It would display a reliance on the Holy Spirit and a proper view of our limited role in the advance of God's kingdom. We do play a part, but we're not the main character. We are part of the process, but we're not the one who determines the timing.

Our Attitudes in Gradual Pre-Evangelism

Not long ago, I was interviewed on a live radio program about evangelism. The host told me about his career in sales, where he learned to "A-B-C: Always Be Closing." He elaborated that he always wanted to press his client for a decision. It was important, he assured me, to not let them walk away without "closing the deal." He then asked the leading question, "Don't you think we need to do the same thing with sharing the gospel? Shouldn't we always be closing?"

I must confess that I was not too happy at that moment. I feared his live radio show was about to suffer a kind of death. I tentatively countered, "Well . . . I do think we can learn a lot from the world of sales. I know I have taken some lessons from how sales people ask questions and offer their product. But I don't think evangelism is exactly like sales, and I don't think the gospel is a product."

There was a brief pause, followed by a change in topic. Something tells me I may not get invited back on that show again. This gradual approach to pre-evangelism that I'm promoting may require a shift in attitude. For those of us who have been trained to evangelize more quickly and "close the deal," we may need a change in perspective. I've made that shift. I've seen enough examples of God's use of the gradual approach to convince me it's worth our consideration and experimentation.

Here are three attitude adjustments I think can help us as we reach out in our Athens-like cultures.

1. Intentionally Rely on the Holy Spirit

This may seem obvious. We trust the Holy Spirit to open up blind eyes and soften hardened hearts. We realize the Holy Spirit must do

the work of regeneration in order for our gospel proclamation to bear fruit. But are we willing to allow him to dictate the pace of the process as well? Sometimes he moves more slowly than we'd like. I find it helpful to pray in two directions throughout the outreach process. I pray for the non-Christian, that God would do what only he can do and make his gospel irresistible to them. But I also pray for myself, that God would give me peace in the midst of my anxiousness, and patience if the process doesn't move along as fast as I'd like. The same Holy Spirit who "will prove the world to be in the wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment" (John 16:8) in non-Christians, promises the fruit of the Spirit—which includes patience—in me.

2. Acknowledge That We Might Accomplish More by Attempting Less

This seems counterintuitive. We want to convince atheists that God really does exist, that he's holy and loving, that he wants us to know him personally, that he sent his Son so we could escape his wrath, and that they'd better say yes to the offer of forgiveness of sins right now because "today is the day of salvation!" But if we overwhelm people with too much information or arguments or "proofs," we might end up doing very little. We might do better by going for just one small goal at a time.

3. Be Willing to Remain Uncomfortable

A gradual approach to pre-evangelism might require some conversations to pause without resolution. To be sure, we'll want to suggest and offer the resolution later on. But we have to allow that uneasiness to linger long enough for them to feel the need for resolution. Otherwise our "answer" doesn't really connect to a real question they should be asking. For example, if we've persuaded someone that God is both holy and loving and we are both image-bearers and sinners, they might feel uneasy about all that. To quote C. S. Lewis again, "we have cause to be uneasy."¹⁰ The gospel has to be bad news before it's good news. Sometimes we have to destabilize before offering a better way.

By the way, we might need to admit that some of our evangelistic strategies center more on feeling good about ourselves than on what's best for the non-Christian. Sometimes, we're more concerned about alleviating guilt feelings, or getting credit for proclaiming the whole gospel, or looking good before other believers than we are about promoting God's glory, following his timing, allowing for him to use others in the process, and trusting that he's more than capable of orchestrating his salvation process according to his timing and plan.

When I began my research project and wanted to recruit recent converts for my interviews, I spoke to a campus fellowship and asked for volunteers. "If you've become a Christian within the past two years, please sign up on this form I'm about to pass around." It seemed straightforward enough. I added, "I should tell you, however, that I probably won't be able to contact you for six months or more. So please be patient."

As the clipboard made its way up and down the rows, one young man, Matt, signed up—much to the surprise of his friend, Ben, sitting next to him. The two of them had been talking for quite some time about the gospel, and as far as Ben knew, Matt was still on the fence and had not yet come to faith. Later, Ben told me his conversation with Matt went something like this:

Ben: Hey, I noticed you signed up on that list to do that interview for the speaker.

Matt: Yeah.

Ben: I was kind of surprised by that. Did you become a Christian while that guy was talking?

Matt: No.

Ben: Well, then, did you become a Christian sometime since we talked on Tuesday?

Matt: No.

Ben: Am I missing something?

Matt: No. The guy said we should sign up if we've become a Christian, but he said he won't be able to get back in touch with us for six months. I'm pretty sure I'll be a Christian by then.

Ben told me, one year later, that Matt had indeed become a Christian—around six months after I spoke on their campus! Who would have ever thought that asking people to forecast belief could be part of their faith story? I never thought of “predictive evangelism” as a successful strategy.

But God often moves gradually—at his pace, through his processes, in unlikely, unpredictable, unscriptable, unimagined ways. Let’s trust him with the process and his power to use us in improbable, wonder-filled ways.

BRAINSTORMS: STARTERS

We all need a few gospel conversation starters. It’s worth brainstorming possibilities ahead of time. Ask yourself, what might work for you as go-to statements that help you transition from ordinary, casual conversations to eternally significant ones. Find words you’ll feel comfortable saying. They need to sound like you, not like someone else you’re parroting.

After finding out where people come from, what they do for an occupation, how they like to spend their free time, and so forth, you might try one of these:

- Was religion part of your upbringing? How has that shaped you today?
- Do you ever find yourself wondering about God or some of life’s big questions?
- What kinds of things give you a sense of meaning or purpose?
- Do you ever think much about spiritual things?
- What part has faith ever played in your life?