BRINGING THE GOSPEL HOME

Witnessing to Family Members, Close Friends, and Others Who Know You Well

RANDY NEWMAN
“Newman has given us a well-written book full of wisdom on how to accomplish a very difficult task—witness to our own relatives. The pages are lucid, wise, honest, humorous, and convicting all at once. The stories of successes and failures powerfully hit home. The suggestions of leading questions and ideas for sharing the faith at the end of the chapters are outstanding. I believe God will use this wonderful book to lead many relatives to Christ.”

Robert Peterson, Professor of Systematic Theology, Covenant Theological Seminary

“Bringing the Gospel Home keeps its promise to give hope to Christians who long to see family members come to Christ. Newman builds his approach on solid theology, offers sound advice, and highlights his insights with rich stories that connect head and heart in the art of bringing people to Jesus. The methods in this book, while focused on winning family, are easily transferable to sharing the gospel with anyone. I recommend this book to all who want to increase their skills at sharing the good news with others.”

Jerry Root, Associate Professor of Evangelism and Leadership, Wheaton College; coauthor, The Sacrament of Evangelism

“Pastoring in a city that can be political to the point of being polemical, and diplomatic to the point of being deceitful, I tend to notice those people who embody truth-loving tact. Randy Newman is one of those people. And his skill at sharing the gospel is exemplary. Here, Newman shows us how to witness boldly and winsomely to our nonbelieving family members. Many would benefit by reading this book.”

John Yates, Rector, The Falls Church, Falls Church, Virginia

“Newman has challenged and charmed lay audiences as a plenary speaker at apologetics conferences sponsored by the Evangelical Philosophical Society. His approach to evangelism is a wonderful blend of thoughtful faith and deep compassion for people. You will be inspired by his insights.”

William Lane Craig, Research Professor of Philosophy, Talbot School of Theology; founder, Reasonable Faith, www.reasonablefaith.org
“This is one scary title. But if you think you’ve got a story to tell about family versus faith, listen to Randy’s own, and the others he’s collected here. And hear his hopeful and wise reflections. They will help you out of the sticky place you’re in.”

C. John Sommerville, Professor Emeritus of English History, University of Florida; author, How the News Makes Us Dumb

“Listening is as much of persuasion—perhaps more—as is explaining. Newman shows how we can engage our families winsomely, respectfully, and with the grace and truth that alone can transform lives for eternity. Introducing loved ones to Jesus can be as difficult as it is imperative. Bringing the Gospel Home provides us with a user-friendly roadmap.”

Robert Schwarzwalder, Senior Vice President, Family Research Council
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Witnessing to Family Members, Close Friends, and Others Who Know You Well

RANDY NEWMAN
Bringing the Gospel Home: Witnessing to Your Family Members, Close Friends, and Others Who Know You Well
Copyright © 2011 by Randy Newman
Published by Crossway
1300 Crescent Street
Wheaton, Illinois 60187

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Interior design and typesetting: Lakeside Design Plus
Cover design: Dual Identity inc
First printing 2010
Printed in the United States of America

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All emphases in Scripture quotations have been added.


Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Newman, Randy, 1956–
Bringing the Gospel home : witnessing to family members, close friends, and others who know you well / Randy Newman.
   p. cm.
   Includes bibliographical references.
   BV4520.N458 2011
   248’.5—dc22
2010044482

Crossway is a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

VP 22 21 20 19 18 17 16 15 14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
Joyfully dedicated to my three sons,
Dan, David, and Jon.
“Sons are a heritage from the LORD.”
Psalm 127:3 (NIV)
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Behind every book stands a cast of characters who made it possible. This one is no exception. First, I am thankful for the many people who shared their stories with me about witnessing to their family. Many of them cried. Their vulnerability and compassion for their relatives moved me greatly.

My second family, the Olive Tree Congregation, lovingly led by my dear friends Dan and Cynthia Strull, provided me with a home away from home and lots of prayer while working on this book.

Many friends encouraged me greatly while writing. I offer thanks for the strength I gained from Spencer Brand, Patrick Dennis, Mark Petersburg, Lin Johnson, Glenn Oeland, the Washington, DC, Campus Crusade staff team, my Faculty Commons co-laborers, our church couples’ group, and the George Mason Faculty Fellowship.

I am grateful to God for shaping my thinking through three important influences: the sermons of Tim Keller, the theological writings of D. A. Carson, and just about every word written by or about C. S. Lewis.

And how could I write a book about family without acknowledging how thankful I am for mine?

Mom and Dad, thank you for thinking so highly of me and letting me know you think I’m great. You’re deluded, of course. But I’m thankful to God for your love for me.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Barry, Ellen, Brian, and Susy, thank you for valuing family so much that you’re willing to travel ridiculous amounts of miles just to have Chinese food together.

Dan, David, and Jon, thank you for providing nonstop joy and “outright prolonged laughter.”

And, Pam, thank you for being a woman of valor, the wife of my youth, my most serious critic, my most diligent proofreader, my biggest cheerleader, and my dearest life partner. Without you, I wouldn’t value family enough to write this book, feel confident enough to express myself, or enjoy family enough to want others do the same.
INTRODUCTION

When I informed a friend I was writing a book on witnessing to family, he told me he had the perfect chapter titles:

Chapter 1: Don’t Do It!
Chapter 2: Don’t Do It!
Chapter 3: Did You Think I Was Kidding?
Chapter 4: Pray for Somebody Else to Do It
Chapter 5: Review Chapters 1, 2, and 3

He then offered several firsthand stories of how not to witness to family. And he had more from where those came from. Since then, many others have volunteered the same kinds of illustrations. Apparently, horror stories outnumber success stories.

This hasn’t deterred me. In fact, it has propelled me to write this book with a sense of urgency. Since my first book, Questioning Evangelism, was published in 2004, God has opened up many opportunities for me to speak about witnessing. During the question-and-answer periods that follow my presentations, inquiries about reaching out to family with the gospel have always been the most frequent and painful questions posed. People want to know how they can engage their loved ones with the good news. After my presentations, people come up to tell me, through tears, of their atheistic father or bitter mother or gay brother or drug-addicted sister
or cult-ensnared daughter or backslidden cousin, and on and on it goes.

Some tell of family members who once held closely to the faith. Their testimonial goes something like this: “We were raised in a great Christian home but now my brother wants nothing to do with God.” Sometimes the drama moves in the opposite direction: “I was raised Jewish (or Muslim or Hindu or Buddhist), and I came to faith in college. My parents have almost disowned me.” Sometimes the disowning actually happens. One woman told me that her father, a Hindu priest, warned her, “If you ever step foot in a church again, I will kill myself.” (More about her situation later).

In some instances the “prodigals” ran away from a Christian home and now wallow in the mud (or the drugs or the sex or whatever other messes the Devil finds for them). In other settings the ones who became Christians are considered the rebels! The difference in the levels of pain seems minimal.

My purpose in this book is to offer hope. Consider that Scripture often describes God’s work in salvation as a miracle. He “makes alive” what was once “dead” (Eph. 2:1–5); he “delivered us from the domain of darkness” (Col. 1:13); and he explained that “with man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible” (Matt. 19:26). Once we realize that evangelism occurs in the realm of the miraculous, we start praying more faithfully, trusting more wholeheartedly, and proclaiming more gently. When we relinquish trust in our ability to persuade and latch onto God’s power to save, we find hope beyond explanation.

In the process of researching this topic, I interviewed dozens of Christians with stories to tell—some with happy endings, some with other kinds of finales, and some still waiting to see how it all turns out. In this book I share some of their stories. All of them, regardless of how unsaved relatives have responded, hold encouraging lessons tucked inside.
Let me begin by telling you one of my favorite stories. I grew up in a Jewish family and came to believe in Jesus as the Messiah when I was a sophomore in college. That means I have a Jewish mother. All those Jewish mother jokes you’ve heard are true . . . but they’re not funny. Telling my Jewish parents that I now embraced Christianity (what they thought of as “the faith of the Nazis”) was no picnic. They responded politely, but I have no idea what they said to each other after we got off the phone. (By the way, telling family members about your newfound faith in person—face to face—is much better than telling them over the phone. I was a chicken.)

Priding themselves as true liberals, my parents (my Dad was silent on the phone while my mother did all the talking) simply told me they were happy for me. In a way that only a Jewish mother could intone, “I’m happy” sounded more like “You’ve made me miserable.” What followed were two requests and three wishes I will never forget:

Request 1: Don’t tell Grandma and Grandpa.
Request 2: Stay away from your younger brother.
Wish 1: We hope you won’t join some commune in Colorado.
Wish 2: We hope you won’t try to change the world.
Wish 3: We hope you won’t shave your head.

I’ve often amused myself with the thought that I now work for Campus Crusade for Christ, an organization that meets every other summer in Colorado and was founded under the motto, “Come help change the world.” However, I have never shaved my head.

My first attempts to witness to my parents were met with stonewalled resistance. “We’re happy for you” was always inseparably followed by the word “but.” “. . . but don’t talk to us about this,” “. . . but we don’t want to hear about this,”
“. . . but please talk about something else . . . anything else.” I got the message. Jesus was off limits.

That didn’t stop me from sending books, pamphlets, and long letters imploring my parents to be true to their Jewish roots and embrace the Jewish Messiah who was promised by Jewish prophets.

Once I even sent them the Jesus film, a presentation of the Gospel of Luke, in Hebrew. (I had already sent them a copy of the film in English, which they didn’t watch). My parents don’t speak a word of Hebrew, but somehow I thought they’d be impressed that Jesus spoke the same language as Moses. Of course, the fact that the Hebrew was dubbed into the film didn’t seem to deter me from sending it. They never watched the Hebrew version either. Like its English counterpart, it collected dust on the shelf near their television.

Once I invited my parents to a Messianic Jewish congregation’s Friday night worship service. They walked out.

I also sent them a copy of my favorite book for telling Jewish people about the gospel, Stan Telchin’s *Betrayed*. It’s a masterfully crafted intertwining of the author’s testimony with biblical arguments for the messiahship of Jesus. Telchin tells of his daughter’s going away to college and finding Jesus, an offense to his Jewish sensibilities that needed to be countered. He felt “betrayed” and set out on a year-long research project to prove his daughter wrong. What he found, instead, was irrefutable and irresistible evidence that led him, his wife, and their other daughter to faith in the Messiah. His book has been used countless times to lead Jewish people to faith. Surely, I thought, a book as wonderful as this would be the silver bullet that would usher my parents into the fold. My mother read it, made no comment, and then gave it away to someone who she said, “really needed something like that.”

Nothing worked. For decades. All the “frontal assaults” failed to have any kind of impact. To be honest, I have to
tell you that at some point I gave up hope. I stopped praying and probably harbored some bitterness toward God that he hadn’t chosen my parents to be among the elect.

Then one day my Mom and I had a pivotal phone conversation. She recounted an experience she had at a funeral for a teacher at the high school I had attended. I knew this man. He was a sarcastic, bitter atheist who suffered for over two years as a debilitating cancer ate away at his body. Hearing the reports of his gradual demise was a painful process. Worse than the medical aspects of the story were the spiritual ones. He never softened as he approached death. In fact, it would be more accurate to say that he grew in bitterness as the end approached.

My mother, whose religious philosophy at the time could be summed up as “everyone goes to heaven,” told me of her attempts to comfort the deceased man’s grieving adult children.

“Don’t worry,” she told them, “at least now your father is in a better place.”

Their response surprised my mother. Having embraced their father’s skepticism, they rolled their eyes in disdain for my mother’s naïveté and rudely walked away from her. She told this, I believe, to elicit some sympathy from me. After all, I was her “religious” son, and I certainly would give credence to her attempts to point atheists toward the supernatural.

I was torn. I was grateful that my mother thought about the afterlife. But I couldn’t help thinking about numerous passages of Scripture that argue the exact opposite of my mom’s position. Indeed I did not believe my former teacher was in a better place. I had visions of flames and worms and gnashing of teeth. I wanted to preach an entire sermon, right there and then, on the phone, about everlasting torment, wrath, and sulfur.

I opted, instead, to ask my mother a question. “Mom, how do you know that?”
Long pause.
“How do I know what?” she replied.
“How do you know he’s in a better place? It sounds like you know that with a great deal of confidence. What makes you so sure?”
I should tell you that Jewish-Mother-guilt can be conveyed with silence, even over the telephone, just as powerfully as face to face. I knew my mother was upset with me. But I also knew that, for seventy years, she had been stuck in a religious frame of reference that needed to be challenged. If not now, when?
Finally, she said, “I guess I don’t know that.”
This was a breakthrough. Nothing I had ever said, sent, diagramed, or preached had ever seemed to get through. This was different. She budged from confident assurance of belief in a lie to an uncomfortable doubt that could lead to searching and questioning. I wanted to sing the Hallelujah chorus!
The rest of our phone call was strained. Somewhere in there I elaborated, “Well, maybe you should do some research about this.” In just a few minutes, we hung up. But I was thankful that something had finally shaken my mother’s naïve confidence. Maybe, just maybe, she was beginning to doubt that anyone could go to heaven, regardless of his life’s experiences or faith position.
We didn’t talk about matters of faith for a very long time after that phone call. And then my parents bought their first computer. They signed up for Internet service and learned how to send me e-mail . . . lots of e-mail . . . most of which had musical attachments. Suddenly, a mode of communication opened up between my mother and me that didn’t seem threatening to her. She was able to express doubts and ask questions with less fear than ever. Mind you, she was now seventy-one years old and this was more than twenty years after I had become a believer.
One day my mother sent me an e-mail that read, “I think I might try to read the New Testament.” I wanted to print that e-mail and frame it. “Well, I’d love to hear what you think about it, Mom,” I replied, trying to understate my enthusiasm. Over the next year, our e-mails contained frequent interaction about Jesus in the Gospels. Her questions were challenging:

“Why did Jesus say you should hate your father and mother?”

“Why did people try to kill him so many times?”

“What’s so good about turning the other cheek?”

I resisted the temptation to just give answers. I found that answering her questions with questions was more productive. Not only was this a very Jewish style of communication, but it engaged her in the thinking process far better than just telling her what I thought. So I hit reply and typed out things like:

“Why do you think Jesus said such an outrageous thing?”

“What was it about Jesus’ claims that would bother people so much?”

“What could be some possible advantages to turning the other cheek? What alternative would be better?”

For months our “dialogues” forced her to think differently than she had for seven decades. Along the way, I started praying for her salvation—again. In fact, my prayers became more focused and earnest. Could it actually be that my Jewish mother could come to faith? Is God that powerful? Is he that good?

The next framable e-mail my mother sent read, “I think I’m beginning to think like you, Randy, that Jesus was the Messiah.” I quickly replied, “Would you say that he’s your Messiah?” She responded, “Not yet.”

But one day, just as unexpectedly as every other step along the way, my mother asked me if I’d ever heard of a book called Betrayed by some guy named Stan Telchin. (There are
advantages to communicating by e-mail. It allows you to yell things out loud like, “Well, yes, of course I’ve heard of that book. I gave you a copy of it years ago and you gave it away to someone else!” Then, after you get that kind of outburst out of the way, you can calmly hit reply and type, “Yes. I think I have heard about it. Why do you ask?”

A few more e-mails explained why she liked the book so much and how she appreciated getting it from a friend who had written a personalized note inside the cover, and that the book had sat on her shelf for at least five years, and that she’d like to discuss it over the phone with me sometime. I couldn’t wait.

That phone call had all the markings of supernatural intervention about it. My mother’s eyes had been opened. God’s timing is not my timing, his ways are not my ways, and, best of all, his power is not my power. There was a gentleness in my mother’s voice that gave evidence of new life. I almost fell to my knees when I heard her say, “My only problem is knowing that I’m going to get opposition from all my Jewish friends and relatives when I tell them that now I’m a believer in Jesus. But I guess God will help me with that too.” Chokingly, I said, “Yes. I’m sure he will.”

A short time later, my mother was baptized—by my brother who had become a Christian and was serving as a pastor in the Netherlands. (Yes. The brother my parents told me to stay away from! That’s another story. I’ll share that later.) Whenever I’m in the mood to cry, I pop open the photo, stored on my computer, of my mother being baptized by my brother.

**Some Assumptions of This Book**

Watching my seventy-five-year-old Jewish mother come to faith, and somehow, mysteriously, having God involve me in the process, has taught me numerous lessons. I’ve seen the value of patience, the significance of prayer, the marvel of
grace, and the power of love. I’ll share some more insights about those lessons, along with many others, throughout this book. But allow me to share some insight on how I think about this whole process before going any further. Three foundational assumptions shape my view of telling your earthly family about your heavenly father.

First, I realize that most Christians are not evangelists. Consequently, for them evangelism is not easy. A problem often arises because many of the people who speak and write about evangelism are evangelists. For them, evangelism is easy. It’s as natural as breathing. They can’t imagine not witnessing to anyone and everyone who comes their way. They tend to make the rest of us feel guilty.

They say, “I cannot sleep at night unless I have witnessed to at least one soul that day.” When I hear that (and I have found I am not alone), I usually think, “I sleep just fine!” Or they tell how they always pray for a witnessing opportunity as soon as they sit down at their seat on an airplane. I pray for there to be an empty seat next to me.

When we’re told that witnessing should come naturally, we’re set up for failure and frustration. For the vast majority of Christians, evangelism never seems natural and never flows easily. As a result we fall into one of several pits. Either we sound like someone we’re not, evangelizing with a different tone of voice than we use for every other topic. Or we wait for it to “feel right” or easy and, when that doesn’t happen, we clam up. Or we beat up on ourselves for not being bold enough, smart enough, or quick enough. Thus we tell people “good news” but sound more racked with guilt than liberated by grace.

These are just the potential problems with witnessing to strangers or acquaintances. Witnessing to family members—the ones who have known us the longest, seen us at our worst, and are the least likely to fall for our facades—seems infinitely more daunting. To help you tackle this all-important task,
I have included three ingredients in each chapter: insights from the Scriptures, stories of others who have learned some lessons along the way, and specific steps you can take to make progress in bringing the gospel home.

Second, you might have expected this book to be organized differently. Perhaps you thought there’d be one chapter on witnessing to parents, one on siblings, one on aging grandparents, etc. I considered this but saw at least two problems with that approach. The bigger problem is that the issues really don’t break up that way. There are so many over-arching dynamics that transcend specific relationships. The more I talked to people who had seen loved ones come to faith, the more I observed themes that applied to both parents and children, brothers and sisters, the aging and the immature, etc. It seemed more helpful to examine universal factors like grace, truth, love, humility, time, eternity, and hope. Wrestling with these issues may prove more helpful than mere “how-to” recipes of “say this,” “don’t say this,” “remember to do this.”

If the chapters were about specific relationships, a smaller, yet significant problem could arise. You might merely read just the chapter that you thought applied to you and miss out on the insight shared in the other sections. Even worse, you could simply pick this book up in a bookstore, skim only “your” chapter and, horror of all horrors, not buy the book! We simply can’t have that.

Third, it is important to remember that this book is far more about God and the gospel than it is about you and your family. I wrestle with weightier matters than mere relational dynamics in these pages. All of the chapters contain some theological reflection to put a frame around the practical instruction about evangelism. Please be patient. You might be tempted to skip the theological parts. But a richer understanding of biblical truth, I have found, can provide a firmer foundation for bold witness and clear communication.
Besides, many people reject the gospel today because they think Christians are shallow simpletons. In many cases, they have a legitimate gripe. Let’s stop giving them ammunition for that charge and instead dig deeper into the Scriptures and think biblically about all of life.

The first few chapters especially focus more on your understanding of the gospel than your sharing of the good news. It would be the height of irony to speak of sharing the message of God’s gracious offer of salvation but point the spotlight on you. My hope is to avoid a common trap when teaching about evangelism—that is, to leave you obsessed with how you’re coming across, what you should say, what you must remember, what you need to feel, say, and do, and when you need to be bolder, smarter, quicker, and holier.

Instead, my hope is that grace will amaze you more than ever. My prayer is that God’s love will spill over into your conversations, gratitude will infuse your prayers, joy will transform your tone of voice and, like the prophet Micah, you will praise God and say: “Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance? You do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy” (Mic. 7:18, NIV).
Paulette came home for Christmas break from her freshman year of college armed with enough evangelistic tracts for each of her siblings. Her two sisters and one brother were going to hear the gospel whether they wanted to or not. After all, this method of sharing the gospel in concise booklet form had worked in her life.

Having been raised in a nominal Christian family that occasionally attended church (and a rather liberal one at that), she had gone off to college with no interest in God or religion. But a campus evangelist caught her attention and started getting through to her. As she listened to his logical, intellectually respectable evidence for the resurrection of Jesus, she thought he was proclaiming a “new religion.” At least, it was new to her.

This was no open-air ranting lunatic. He spoke calmly and reasonably to a packed audience in the university’s student center auditorium and handed out comment cards for people

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1Unless otherwise noted, I’ve changed the names of people I’ve used in illustrations, and, in most cases, I’ve changed enough details of their stories to protect their anonymity.
to indicate interest in further discussion. Paulette couldn’t believe her eyes as she watched her hand writing her name and dorm address on the card and check the box marked “more information.” Less than one week later, two girls stopped by her room and presented the good news by doing something anyone could do: they read a short booklet and asked Paulette if she’d like to pray the prayer on the last page.

She did and she prayed and it changed her life.

So certainly the same pattern would play itself out back at home. She lined up her three younger siblings against the wall of her bedroom (after making sure that Mom and Dad were nowhere in sight). She gave them each their own copy of the booklet and read each page aloud. The fifteen- and thirteen-year-old sisters and the ten-year-old brother cowered in submission under their big sister’s orders to listen. When she asked them if they’d like to pray the prayer, they all said yes. Paulette was elated (and relieved). Not only were her precious sisters and darling brother joining her in this newfound faith, but this method of evangelism had not let her down.

That was over thirty years ago and her faith has remained strong.

But the fruit from her evangelistic lineup did not endure. The elder of the two sisters continued to drink her way through high school, went off to college and partied with the best of them, and only calmed down years later—after finding peace and tranquility in the New Age movement. The younger sister puzzled everyone in the family for years because, despite her good looks, she never had a boyfriend. When she told everyone she was a lesbian, that all made sense. And Paulette’s little baby brother, who showed signs of intense devotion to Christ throughout his entire four years of college, one day decided the Christian faith just doesn’t work, walked away from his marriage to a Christian woman, and still finds more relevance in secular motivational speakers than in the Scriptures.
Paulette now regrets her lining up of relatives against the wall and would urge Christians to find other strategies. This book is an attempt to explore those other methods. But before we launch into that part of the task, a bit of study about the nature of the family and the truth of the gospel needs to set the stage for training and how-tos.  

**God’s Plan for the Family**

A singles’ pastor once told me, “There’s no drama like family drama.” Ever since, I’ve wondered why this is so. Perhaps it is because the stakes are so high. God’s design for the family is so important, so profound, and so powerful that the Devil points his most potent weapons at this most crucial target. Given that scenario, it is no wonder we feel like we’re on a contested, spiritual battlefield more often than at a serene, Norman Rockwellesque dinner table.

A full appreciation for why God loves families so much and why the Evil One hates them so much sets an important backdrop for our investigation of how to share the good news with our relatives.

**Family Is Important**

Our discussion of the high value God places upon the family must begin with a look at the very nature of a Trinitarian God. He calls himself “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.” He could have chosen terms other than ones related to family. But he

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2 Please don’t conclude that the use of booklets is always a bad method of evangelism. It can be the perfect tool in the right setting. See Owen’s story later in this chapter. No single method fits all situations. Jesus’ examples of addressing different people in different ways to proclaim the same message validates a variety of methods for this all-important task.

3 Those who suggest avoiding emotionally charged terms like “father,” “son,” and “Holy Spirit” by replacing them with “Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer” make too great a sacrifice at the altar of cultural relevance. To be sure, God is indeed Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. He himself validates those titles—but not as replacements for Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Jesus’ authoritative use of “Father” points us to its primacy as a title, which must not be censored, avoided, or even minimized. We dare not let this world’s devaluing of the family dictate our views, values, or choice of vocabulary.
didn’t. Even though the title of “father” is found less often in the Old Testament than in the New, it is not out of place in the books of the law, the prophets, and the writings. The notion that God can be understood as a caring, nurturing, protecting Abba pervades both testaments.

Just one example, a rather substantial one, should suffice for our argument. When the prophet Isaiah arrived at that climactic moment of his Immanuel prophecy, declaring that the Messiah will be with us, he revealed God’s trust-inspiring titles of “Wonder-Counselor, Almighty-God, Eternal-Father, Prince-of-Peace” (Isa. 9:6, my translation). Right there in the midst of some of the loftiest titles of deity stands the label “Father.”

Thus, it is not without scriptural warrant that the Jewish community crafted and recites one of its holiest prayers, Avinu, Malkenu—“Our Father, Our King.” The rabbis of old recognized God’s immanent, gentle, and intimate nature found in his title “father” as well as his transcendent, royal, and holy nature seen in “king.” He is both loving and ruling, to be trusted and revered, the one we rest in and bow before. Our response to him is both as sons and servants, children and worshipers, in delight and in awe.

Jesus’ frequent use of the term “Father” for the first person of the Trinity was consistent with the Old Testament’s depiction of God as one who “is gracious and compassionate . . . faithful to all his promises and loving toward all he has made . . . upholds all those who fall . . . and watches over all who love him . . .” (Ps. 145:8, 13–14, 20, NIV).

No wonder Paul connects the divine pattern to every earthly family in his prayer for the Ephesians, where he petitions “the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named” (Eph. 3:15) for strength, stability, grounding, and comprehension of God’s love (see Eph. 3:14–19).

\[4\] It would not be difficult to find dozens, if not hundreds, of other verses that praise God for his father-like care and compassion.
When families fulfill their God-ordained purposes, this kind of strength flows to and through all members in beautiful ways.

Consider some of the other family terminology linked to profound truths in the Scriptures. Those redeemed by the blood of Christ are called “sons” who have been “adopted.” The church is referred to as the “bride of Christ.” And, when all of time is culminated, at what kind of banquet will we feast? A “marriage supper.”

The point not to be missed is that the image of family is woven into the revelation of the godhead and displayed at crucial junctures of God’s written Word. Therefore, we must treat family with reverence and awe. It is a divinely ordained and shaped institution, not merely some culturally constructed convention that needs to be tolerated.

There are at least two implications of God’s Trinitarian nature upon our reflections about family. First, since God is relational, we who are created in his image are also relational. We are hard-wired for communal connections, of which family ties are the most intimate and important. Second, since God is others-oriented (the Father reveals the Son, the Son submits to the Father, the Holy Spirit seeks to bring glory to the Son, etc.), so we should be others-oriented. Selflessness validates our image-of-God-bearing nature. Selfishness violates it. Living our lives theocentrically, the ultimate display of other-centeredness, resonates with our very nature, our reason for being, and our deepest longings.

All this is to say that family dynamics weigh heavily in our lives. We who have been chosen by a heavenly Father, redeemed by an atoning Son, and sealed with a Holy Spirit should value family highly. Despite all the cultural trends that serve to lampoon and demean the institution of the family (even if we imagine our specific family’s portrait in the dictionary next to the word “dysfunctional”), we who have experienced the unmerited favor of God must look to him.
for the resources to uphold the high regard for this divinely
ordained, all-important institution.

**Family Is Intimate**

When God established the family, he started with the most
basic unit—a marriage between a man and a woman. He
rolled out the blueprint for all time with this prescription:
“a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to
his wife, and they shall become one flesh” (Gen. 2:24). When
Jesus was challenged about possible escape clauses allowing
for a divorce, he appealed to this “one-flesh” intimacy as the
basis for preserving a marriage. When Paul argued against
uniting with a prostitute, he recalled this “one-flesh” imagery
as proof that mere “casual sex” was an impossibility and an
oxymoron.

God further described intimacy as shamelessness by add-
ing, “And the man and his wife were both naked and were
not ashamed” (Gen. 2:25). These poetic statements imply
far more than just sexual union. The man and the woman
enjoyed unhindered oneness in all dimensions of their beings.
They felt no need to hide from each other using fig leaves,
lies, emotional withdrawal, or pretense. Adam and Eve had
no need to explain, clarify, restate, employ active listening
skills, offer alibis, or ever say, “You should be ashamed of
yourself.”

Just recently, I watched a pastor and his wife receive a
standing ovation from their congregation as appreciation
for over thirty years of caring for the church. The applause
also rose out of gratitude for their modeling a marriage that
endured through trials and pains. As the volume in the sanc-
tuary rose to a level preventing anyone from overhearing,
the husband whispered something in the ear of his bride. She
laughed and the two of them exchanged a look that could
only come after decades of intimacy. No one else knew what
he said or what she thought, but we all felt a sense of awe for the intimacy these two had forged along the way.

Among the many disastrous results of Adam and Eve’s rebellion against God, painfully recounted in Genesis 3, are the impulses to hide from one another (hence the fig leaves). In other words, the fall brought about a marring of the one-flesh intimacy God intended as the foundation for family.

While obviously not to the level of sexual intimacy, a kind of openness and unashamedness should pass down from the intimate couple to all of the family, thus creating a kind of greenhouse that fosters trust, depth of communication, and a joy found nowhere else.

Please don’t miss my point. Families were instituted by God to foster intimacy, to build trust, to be the springboard from which all relationships should work, and to bring about connectedness between people. The Devil hates such goals and continues to do all he can to make families into sources of alienation rather than intimacy.

**Family Makes an Impression**

Families also serve as God’s training centers. Consider the many verses in Proverbs that portray the family as the setting for promoting wisdom, developing discernment, acquiring prudence, and establishing the fear of the Lord. Relational bookends shape Proverbs—beginning with a father telling his son to pursue wisdom and concluding with a beautiful portrayal of an “excellent wife.” Again, note the use of familial imagery.

To be sure, the book of Proverbs addresses other issues besides family. Many admonitions require individualistic application. Taming your tongue, balancing your budget, overcoming sloth, controlling your temper, cultivating generosity, and many other fruits of righteousness all rely on personal discipline and wisdom, which flow from the “fear of the Lord.” But the numerous promises for family prosperity
and the many admonitions for parents to raise godly children support a high estimation of the power of family to forge character. It could even be argued that individuals are more likely to pursue wisdom and godliness if those virtues were modeled for them in the early, formative days of their lives.

The “tent of the upright,” contrasted with “the house of the wicked,” will flourish (Prov. 14:11), have “much treasure (15:6), have rooms “filled with all precious and pleasant riches” (24:4), and serve as a “nest” from whence people should not stray (27:8).

Proverbs seems to assume that a strong marriage is the backbone of every family. Hence, the wise father presents colorful contrasts between an “excellent wife” and the other variety. The good option “is a crown of her husband” (12:4), “from the LORD” (19:14), and a source of sensual delights, capable of “intoxication” (5:19). The one who finds such a wife finds a display of God’s goodness (a better understanding of that phrase than the way most translations put it—“a good thing”) and “obtains favor from the LORD” (18:22). These superlatives are even more remarkable when we remember that they are “a far cry from the not uncommon ancient idea of a wife as chattel and childbearer but no companion.”

The wise father paints a rather different picture of the alternative. A quarrelsome wife is like a “continual dripping of rain” (19:13—an image which gets repeated in 27:15). “A desert land” is one of two locations offered as preferable to living “with a quarrelsome and fretful woman” (21:19). The other spot is “in a corner of the housetop” (21:9; 25:24).

Because God prizes family so highly, it needs protection from a variety of threats. External threats from adultery get a great deal of urgent pleading (see all the lengthy warnings in Proverbs 5–7). Internal threats that lead to strife are so

bad that it would be better to have “a dry morsel with quiet than a house full of feasting with strife” (17:1).

And of course, the family is the institution in which to raise children to fear the Lord, with all the many blessings that flow from that starting point. Because “folly is bound up in the heart of a child” (22:15), parents should be “diligent” (13:24) to discipline their offspring, for that brings “hope” (19:18), “wisdom” (29:15), and “rest” (29:17). Only a fool would “despise his father’s instruction” (15:5). It could even “save his soul from Sheol” (23:14).

Can people who were not raised in God-fearing homes still pursue righteousness later in life? Of course. But one has to wonder if the task is more difficult for someone with a later start. It may parallel the way an adult learning a second language has a disadvantage to a native speaker who was reared with the language permeating the walls and hearts of the home.

**Satan’s Plan for the Family**

Given God’s high ideals for what families should be—reflections of the very nature of a loving, personal God, sources of intimacy and security, and environments that foster godly character—it should come as no surprise that the Devil would want to destroy them. Or at least that he would want to mar families so they misrepresent God’s character, alienate people from one another, or degenerate into hothouses for sinful behavior and thought.

It is no mere coincidence that the first ramifications from the fall were familial. The man, after being confronted by God about his sin in the garden, immediately pointed the finger at his wife as the cause of their demise: “The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate” (Gen. 3:12). As one preacher so poetically stated it, Adam’s “bone of my bones” (see Gen. 2:23) had now become a bone of contention.
And where did the consequences of the fall next show up? In one brother’s jealousy of another, eventually leading to murder. In a remarkably short number of verses, the idyllic family resort had become a satanic ground for death.

Today the Devil employs a whole host of devices to harm families. His goal is far more than making them “dysfunctional.” In fact, the widespread acceptance of that term may be evidence that the Evil One has already succeeded at demeaning God’s high purposes for family. Isn’t “functional” a rather low goal for a family? Is that all we really want, that families “function”? Setting our goal so low and settling for merely “healing the dysfunctions” of a family, I believe, plays right into the Devil’s game plan.

Instead, we should aim for families to be healthy, thriving, intimate, beautiful, strengthening, sanctifying, and, in the truest and fullest sense of the word, good. Let’s declare a moratorium on the terms “dysfunctional” or “functional.” Instead, let’s talk of “healthy” or “unhealthy” families—especially when we talk to our families, no matter how “dysfunctional” they may be. Let’s paint a better picture for what we want our families to be, subtly telling our parents, siblings, children, and others that we hold them in high regard. We want more for them than to be “functional”—a term better suited for cogs in gears than image-bearers sitting around our dining room tables.

**Varieties of Attacks on the Family**

Leo Tolstoy began his disturbing novel, *Anna Karenina*, with these puzzling words: “All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.” I think he saw that numerous weapons attack the family and cause a wide array of pain.

Since marriage serves as the foundation for the family, it follows that attacks on the family would begin at this strategic point. Spurred on by the Devil and appealing to our
flesh, our world today mocks marriage, inflicting some level of insecurity into every master bedroom.

A friend recently e-mailed me with his test results related to a television special about the Ten Commandments. This show explored how well the American public was adhering to the Mosaic top ten. As you might guess, some commandments fared better than others when it came to percentage of obedience. It is comforting that the vast majority of Americans have not committed murder. It might not be surprising that over fifty percent do take the name of the Lord in vain. But my friend wrote to me after the episode about adultery. Since he had never cheated on his wife, he was rated in the highest category ("holy roller") among those who responded to the online questionnaire.

The disturbing statistic was the very high percentage of people who (voluntarily!) reported that they had committed adultery. This is not surprising however. Most movies and television shows glorify extramarital sex as better than the biblically endorsed kind. According to Hollywood, sex outside of marriage is better, more fun, and—best of all—free from negative consequences. Even when those negative consequences are admitted, they are overshadowed by such seductive, attractive portrayals of the immorality that most people find it worth the risk.

But when you talk to people who have been harmed by the sexual revolution—young men and women raised by adultery-prone parents—the images are dramatically different from the ones on TV. Young men I counsel have expressed dismay at ever being able to stay faithful to a spouse because their father failed to model such virtue. No young man should ever have to say, “My father was unfaithful to my mother,” but I have heard those very words more times than I care to recount.

The sexual revolution has also yielded another, rather unanticipated fruit—sexless marriages. Dr. Phil and other
marriage “experts” admit this is a trend not to be ignored. How ironic! You would have thought that our culture’s endless worship of sex would result in more, not less, actual engaging in the act.

But in a remarkably frank article in *The Atlantic Monthly*, Caitlin Flanagan addressed this phenomenon and boldly pointed to the feminist movement as a contributor to the demise of marital sex. She reviewed several books that serve as sex guides for married women to help them rediscover the joy of the marriage bed. One such book is *I Don’t Know How She Does It* by Allison Pearson. Consider the level of honesty Flanagan shows here:

If *I Don’t Know How She Does It*, a book about a working woman who discovers deep joy and great sex by quitting her job and devoting herself to family life, had been written by a man, he would be the target of a lynch mob the proportions and fury of which would make Salman Rushdie feel like a lucky, lucky man. But of course it was written by a with-it female journalist, so it’s safe, even admired. Allison Pearson, we have been given to understand, is telling it like it is. And what she’s telling us, essentially, is that in several crucial aspects the women’s movement has been a bust, even for the social class that most ardently championed it.\(^6\)

The problems get worse as the model of what a family should be moves further from the biblical norm. Jesus wasn’t exaggerating when he said that “the thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy . . .” (John 10:10). And Peter wasn’t overstating things when he warned, “Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour” (1 Pet. 5:8).

I need not belabor the point. The pain often associated with family seems to have no limit. Divorces, incest, and

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alcohol abuse, along with addictions of the widest of varieties, have made the contemporary family the exact opposite of what God intended. Perhaps Tolstoy was onto something. Normal, healthy, beautiful families are all alike in that they represent God and foster joy. The perversions of that goodness have more variety than we’d ever care to imagine.

Two more products of unhealthy families need consideration. Their outward displays may appear less ugly than the ones already addressed, but they cause harm and they have profound implications for the task of witnessing to family.

The first is extreme independence. The pain from divorce or abusive families propels some people toward an idolization of independence. If family didn’t provide wellness, many people erect walls to protect them from further harm. They make their internal compasses their ultimate guide. Much of the self-esteem movement plays into this and hardens those who have erected such emotional fortresses. Thus, people evolve into their own god and savior. They call the shots of their lives and live out their law in remarkably religious ways. They rarely see how selfish this is but receive much societal reinforcement.

Unfortunately, the collateral damage to those around them, especially their family, is seldom considered or acknowledged. Until people see this as sin, a rebellion against the God who made them, “good news” about a Savior will seem irrelevant at best. (I’ll talk more about how to break through this idol of individualism in subsequent chapters).

The second result of an unbalanced understanding of what family should be is the exact opposite of extreme individualism. It is the idolization of the family unit. Some ethnic cultures foster this kind of family or society worship more than others. In fact, it is not unfair to generalize that Western cultures tend to idolize the individual and Eastern cultures tend to idolize the group. Of course there are exceptions to
this rule, but few people find themselves in places that get the balance right.

The ironic yet tragic result is that either way—whether the culture supposedly builds up the individual or devalues the individual—it’s still idolatry of one form or another. And idolatry never works itself out in healthy, life-affirming ways.

For people raised in families that are a god unto themselves, hearing the gospel may seem so alien because its appeal is to individuals. How to break through this barrier will also be addressed later in this book.

**Redemption for the Family**
The whole point of this chapter is to help us view family from a biblical vantage point. Then our witnessing to relatives occurs in an appropriate context. How we think about our family while telling them the good news is almost as important as how we think about our message.

**Family Is Not Ultimate**
Despite God’s high view of the family, it is important to remember that he also shows us in his Word that family is not ultimate. He alone is worthy of worship. Family must fall into place behind him.

For all the beauty, mystery, and power of marriage, Jesus taught of a balance. On the one hand, he declared, “What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate” (Mark 10:9). On the other, he revealed that in heaven, “they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven” (Matt. 22:30).

When faced with his audience’s high prioritization of family, Jesus said something that must have offended some in the crowd. When he was told that his mother and his brothers were outside, Jesus asked, “Who are my mother and my brothers?” He then set a new order of relational priority by
adding, “Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother” (see Mark 3:33–35). Apparently the ties created by a second birth hold sway over those from a first birth.

Jesus’ most extreme statement about the family’s place came with these words: “There is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life.” To punctuate his statement with a timeless punch line, he adds, “But many who are first will be last, and the last first” (see Mark 10:29–31).

C. S. Lewis’s thoughts about “first and second things” could apply here. He wrote of the need to keep second things second. “You can’t get second things by putting them first; you can get second things only by putting first things first. From which it would follow that the question, What things are first? is of concern not only to philosophers but to everyone else.”7 Regarding family, I think Lewis would agree that when we make family more important than God or his kingdom, we distort the family and lose it. The family cannot fulfill its God-given purpose if we demand from it things which only God can provide. Such unrealistic demands from spouses, parents, children, or any other relationship cause it to be a source of pain or bitterness or alienation instead of joy, security, and intimacy.

Jesus’ placing of family underneath kingdom relationships serves as both a rebuke and an encouragement. For those of us who come from healthy families, there may be a temptation to worship it or look to it for more than it can offer. Jesus’ insistence to keep second things second can actually enhance an already healthy family by taking the pressure off. For those of us who did not have such a blessing, these

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words offer tremendous comfort and hope. Our newfound, gospel-crafted family, the church, can now bring wholeness, strength, sustenance, support, and maturity that we did not get from flesh and blood.

This is especially helpful for those who come from families with religious beliefs other than Christianity. Some Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, or even Buddhist families conduct a funeral for a child who places her trust in Jesus. For some, the communication lines are permanently severed.

It is also helpful to remember that Jesus himself was rejected by his own family. After selecting the Twelve “so that they might be with him and he might send them out to preach,” and developing a large following of nonrelatives, those who were related to him said, “He is out of his mind” (Mark 3:14, 21). John tells us that Jesus’ brothers simply “did not believe in him” (John 7:5, NIV). No wonder he summed it up with this proverb, “A prophet is not without honor except in his hometown and in his own household” (Matt. 13:57). If your earthly family doesn’t listen to you or thinks you’ve lost your mind, remind yourself you’re in good company.

**Family Is Redeemable**

The Bible also teaches us to not give up on even the worst of families. The gospel’s power to redeem is greater than any family’s depth of sin. If Paul, who rounded up Christians for arrest, persecuted the church, and gave approval to Stephen’s martyrdom, could one day become “a servant of Christ Jesus” (Rom. 1:1), then so can your brother or sister or even your bisexual, dope-smoking cousin. If Peter could be transformed from a cursing denier of Jesus into a preacher to thousands on Pentecost, there’s hope for your father or mother or endlessly adulterous uncle. Closer to home, if you, who once were dead in your trespasses and sins and an object of God’s wrath (see Eph. 2:1–3), could be drawn to the Savior, then
so can even the most belligerent relative you have to endure every Thanksgiving.

Owen can’t seem to tell his family’s story without using the word “sweet” every three or four minutes. But things weren’t always so sweet. His parents were separated more times than he can count while he was growing up, and they finally divorced when he was only fifteen. He lived with his father, a chain-smoking alcoholic, only because his mother could not be found. She would go missing for weeks and months at a time. Before leaving for college, Owen said he hadn’t seen or heard from his mother in over a year and a half. “When I fled out of state to college, I assumed my mother was dead, and I hoped my father would soon join her.”

Along with his clothes and a few books, he brought his anger and pain to college with him. He certainly brought no faith. With no religious upbringing, Owen says he may have gone to church a total of six times in his life. Still, he filled out a survey taken by a campus fellowship and listened carefully as a staff worker shared the gospel with him during his first month away from home. The good news that there was a heavenly Father who loved him—enough to send his Son to die for him—and would never forsake him sounded like good news indeed. Owen became a Christian and began to be discipled by that same campus staff worker.

Among the many topics of discussion with his discipler, Owen addressed the issue of witnessing to his parents. His wise friend told him it was important for him to let his family know about his new faith as soon as possible but to do so with no agenda for preaching to them . . . yet.

This was good advice, because God had important work to do in Owen before doing redemptive work through him. “I had to come to that painful realization that I was broken just like my parents were. When I focused in on my father’s escape from reality through his alcohol or my mother’s walking away from me, God would point out that I, too, dull
my pain with escapes from reality and I have walked away from God all my life. It was only when I began to forgive my parents that they saw something different in me that was worth asking about.”

Owen’s “sweet” story starts with God changing his heart of anger and hurt to one of forgiveness and love. The next part tells of his sharing the gospel with his mother. In his early twenties, he nervously (he says “shakingly”) read The Four Spiritual Laws booklet to his mother as they sat at her kitchen table. He says it was good to have such a tool to keep him on track because his nerves made it difficult for him to think straight. At forty-four years of age, Owen’s mother trusted Christ for salvation and restoration. The same scenario played out between Owen and his father less than a year later. Same result. One year after that, his parents began a lengthy (and presumably messy) process of reconciliation with each other. A short time later, they restated their marriage vows before a tear-filled family gathering—in a church.

The gospel bore fruit in Owen’s sister’s and brother’s lives as well. It also provided strength in other ways. His parents enjoyed a Christ-centered marriage in a gospel-centered church for a full decade, during which time his Mom developed into quite the initiative-taking evangelist. Who knows how many came to the Savior as a by-product of that nerve-racked, booklet-reading college student’s conversation with his mother.

But then bad news invaded the garden and Owen’s Dad was diagnosed with cancer and a few other diseases. Each one, perhaps, would not have been fatal, but the cumulative effect eventually took his life. Their entire family’s faith gave them strength to handle this trial—Owen’s Dad had assurance of salvation, his Mom had hope in the midst of horrendous pain, and Owen marveled at a God who loved them all.

If you were to ask Owen today about how to witness to your family, he would say it’s all about grace, truth, and love.
“I had to see the grace of God toward me before I could see it extend to them. I had to be honest about the pain I felt, while remembering what pain I caused Jesus on the cross. And I had to experience God’s love before I tried to share it.”

**Implications for Evangelism**

So how does knowing God’s view of our family help us share the gospel with them? Two implications must be mentioned. The first is that evangelizing family is difficult.

M. Scott Peck began his bestselling book, *The Road Less Traveled*, with these words:

> Life is difficult. This is a great truth, one of the greatest truths. (The first of the “Four Noble Truths” which Buddha taught was “life is suffering.”) It is a great truth because once we truly see this truth, we transcend it. Once we truly know that life is difficult—once we truly understand and accept it—then life is no longer difficult. Because once it is accepted, the fact that life is difficult no long matters.⁸

I quote this for three reasons. First, I think Peck is onto something—accepting that life is difficult can be a transformative experience that can be very helpful. But second, I think Peck goes too far. While I agree with the first part of his statement, I think he is naïve to think that this takes away the difficulty. And to add that, “once it is accepted, the fact that life is difficult no long matters” is just plain foolish. Third, I think many Christians have accepted this kind of Buddhist frame of reference for some aspects of their lives, including evangelism. But this worldview gets them into trouble because it is contrary to Scripture.

I do believe that life is difficult, and I also believe that evangelism is difficult, and I especially believe that evangelizing family members is very difficult. But just realizing

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that does not reduce the difficulty. It only helps us tackle a problem with the depth of effort it needs. When you know the difficulty of running a marathon, you train for it, eat the right foods, get proper rest, etc. If you think it’s going to be easy, you’ll probably drop out of the race early on. And indeed many Christians do drop out of the race of witnessing (to family or anyone else) because they thought it was going to be easy.

They had good reason for thinking this, by the way. Many books and seminars train people to witness using terms like “simple,” or “natural,” or “everyday” to describe a task, which turns out to be “difficult” or “frustrating” or “painful.”

I even saw this sales pitch in a catalog of Christian books for an evangelism primer: “This book shows you how easy and natural evangelism can be. It tells you the three questions to ask, the two illustrations to use, and the only Bible verse you’ll ever need in any situation.” I am encouraged that newer books admit the immensity of the task right in their title. I am thinking of books like Evangelism for the Rest of Us, Evangelism for the Tongue-Tied, and Evangelism Made Slightly Less Difficult.9

Peck is right that we must recognize that life, or some parts of it, are difficult. He is surely wrong to say what he says next. Instead, we, as Christians, should view life through biblical lenses rather than Buddhist ones. When we do, we’ll see that our world is fallen, people are slaves to sin, we don’t have sufficient compassion for the lost, and the Devil is not sitting idly by as we tell people to turn from darkness into the light of Christ.

In other words, our goal, whether talking to family members or anyone else, should not be for “comfortable evange-

9Mike Bechtle, Evangelism for the Rest of Us (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2006); Chap Bettis, Evangelism for the Tongue-Tied (Enumclaw, WA: Winepress, 2004); Nick Pollard, Evangelism Made Slightly Less Difficult (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997).
lism” or “natural evangelism” or “easy evangelism,” but rather evangelism that heralds accurately and powerfully the goodness of the gospel—regardless of the difficulty for us in proclaiming it or the resistance from those who hear it.

A second implication is that evangelizing family is probably going to be more emotionally charged than witnessing to strangers or other acquaintances. Two emotional struggles need to be highlighted—guilt and anger. Both seem to attack from within and without.

We feel guilt from within because we think we’re not being bold enough or effective enough or patient enough or loving enough or clear enough with our witness. There may or may not be any substance to this. In other words, this may be false guilt. But some of us have real guilt because of the ways we’ve acted in the past. Our family, in other words, has seen us at our worst, and the guilt we feel for losing our temper or any other display of sin immobilizes us in our witness. “How can I tell my brother about Christ if I’m such a bad example of Christian living?” we wonder.

Some of us feel guilt coming from the outside—from our relatives—because they view us as a traitor to our family or, in some cases, our entire race. Jewish, Muslim, and Hindu converts to the Christian faith face this sometimes more intently than people coming from other faith traditions.

Padma’s father was a Hindu priest who responded to his daughter’s salvation testimony by yelling, “If you ever walk into a church again, I will kill myself.” I don’t know if I recommend Padma’s response as a universal prescription for all who may find themselves in this kind of situation, but her reply was, “Oh, no you won’t. Stop being so dramatic.”

It would take an entire book to address the topic of guilt sufficiently but a shorthand plan for handling guilt must begin with distinguishing between true and false guilt. If the guilt is a form of baseless condemnation, we need to “take every thought captive” (take control over the thought instead of
allowing it to control us), examine its content, call the accusation a lie if that is indeed what it is, and answer it with the truth. This takes a level of internal dialogue that may require practice but it is well worth the effort.\textsuperscript{10}

In the case of accusations of true guilt (you really did lose your temper, acted like a jerk, got drunk, used “unwholesome” vocabulary, laughed at a dirty joke, told a dirty joke, etc.), the response must be the gospel. “Preaching the gospel to yourself” is an essential lifelong, transformational skill.

We need to resist the temptation to respond to accusations of guilt (whether from within or without) with antidotes other than the cross. We must not offer up accounts of virtue that might counterbalance our sin or present pledges for better performance in the future. Instead, we must confess with statements like this: “Yes. You’re right. I was wrong to lose my temper.” In some settings, you could add, “I guess that’s why I need forgiveness from you and from God.”

Regarding the false guilt that comes from our relatives—attacks for being a traitor, etc.—a simple piece of advice I would offer is, “Don’t fall for it.” Guilt manipulation, whether it’s the Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Catholic, or any other version, must be disarmed by disengagement. For some, this disarming will be a brand new experience. Once again, the key is the gospel. Now that you have come to faith in Christ, you must saturate your thinking with the grandest diffuser of guilt: “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:1).

When parents try to manipulate their adult children with guilt (which probably has worked hundreds of times before), it is crucial for the adult child to break that cycle with a calm, loving expression of nonengagement. This may take practice. Here are some gracious things you could try to say, if you ever face a situation like Padma’s:

\textsuperscript{10} A helpful resource to help with this process is Timothy S. Lane and Paul David Tripp, \textit{How People Change} (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2006).
“No, Dad. I don’t think you’ll kill yourself. I certainly would not want you to. But I will continue to explore my faith. And that will involve my going to church.”

“Our family has always valued respect for one another, haven’t we? I’m simply asking you to respect my decisions. I’ll never express my religious opinions in disrespectful ways. And, if I do, you can call me on it.”

“I need to ask you to treat me like an adult. I’ve made some decisions that I’m sure you don’t like. But I’d like to talk about faith issues calmly. Maybe now is not the best time to try that.”

Another emotional component that needs some forethought is anger. Like guilt, this can come from within and from without. Sometimes we get angry at our family (for not understanding us, for not understanding the gospel, for getting angry at us, for using sarcasm or guilt manipulation toward us, etc.). Sometimes they get angry at us, and we need to know how to respond.

An important key in diffusing anger, wherever it comes from, is to preach the gospel to yourself—often enough and thoroughly enough that patience, grace, and love flow out rather than insults, wrath, and lava. I will address this more in the next chapter. For now, it may suffice to ask how would your response to anger change if you meditated on one of these statements:

“I’d probably react with anger too, if one of my relatives were telling me I’ve been wrong about religion my whole life. The only reason I see things differently now is the grace of God. I can ask him to give me patience in this situation.”

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11I devote an entire chapter on anger and how it relates to evangelism in my book, Questioning Evangelism: Questioning People’s Hearts the Way Jesus Did (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2004).
“I’m probably angry at my father (or whoever) right now because I want him to submit to me. In fact, I need him to submit to me because I worship control. Control is my idol. No wonder I need a Savior. I worship false gods. Thank you for the gospel’s cleansing of my idolatry.”

“She’s angry at me. Her anger is making me angry back at her. But, then again, my sin made God angry at me . . . and he chose to pour out his anger on his Son instead of on me. May that kind of love flow from him through me to her.”

These are not naturally occurring thoughts for most of us. But once we start rehearsing them in our minds (part of what Paul called, “the renewal of your mind” in Rom. 12:2), they start to inspire similar thought. Learning this new language can be a beautiful and transformative experience—even if it takes time and effort.

We could go on, looking at a whole host of other emotional issues. For some, it would be beneficial to thoroughly study, through the lens of Scripture, specific issues that trip you up—fear, anxiety, shame, loss, sadness, etc. I encourage you to shine the light of God’s Word on these potential landmines. This may involve hard work, but it will pay huge dividends toward the goal of sharing Christ with your family. It is unlikely that you’ll make much headway if you just focus on evangelism techniques while ignoring the background noise of emotional stress.

Several people I spoke to expressed frustration from lack of objectivity. This seems to be in short supply when we’re around our family. “I’m otherwise a rational and calm person,” Molly told me over a cup of coffee, “but when I get around my family, I lose all sense of composure and objectivity.”

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My favorite source for help on emotions is the Christian Counseling and Education Foundation. See www.ccef.org.
But maybe objectivity is the wrong goal—or, at least, an unrealistic one. Maybe the strong ties of family, woven into the relationships by God, make total objectivity impossible. Maybe we should aim for (and pray for) other goals. The problem with objectivity is that it seems to require a stoic, dispassionate detachment. Often this comes across as uncar ing or apathetic. That would be the last thing we would want to communicate to people we love as we proclaim a message of God’s love. In other words, perhaps the goal of love is better than a goal of objectivity. When we stand in love (flowing from God to us through Christ) and show forth love (in words and with actions), we can let go of the anger, disengage the guilt, and share the gospel so that it truly sounds like gracious, attractive good news instead of haughty, condemning bad news.

**Steps to Take**

1. If you don’t already have one, develop a system for prayer for your family. Perhaps you can set aside a section in a prayer journal. Or maybe you can insert photos of your family members in a place where you look for prayer prompters.

2. Begin your prayers for your family with thanksgiving. This may be more difficult for some people than others. Regardless of your family’s well-being, thank God for the family you have and all the accompanying benefits you can identify. Thank God for his love for each family member and all the gifts he’s given them.

3. You may need to include prayers of confession as well—confession of your lack of love for your family, your idolatry of control in trying to change them, your reliance on your ability to convict them of their sin instead of trusting the Holy Spirit to do that, your coldheartedness, haughtiness, and self-righteousness,
etc. Ask the Holy Spirit to shine his light of truth on your darkness of sin.

4. If you haven’t already done so, “come out of the closet” as a Christian to your family. Pray for gentle words and a gracious demeanor mixed with bold confidence. Decide who would be the safest person to tell first. (I do not advise a group announcement at a holiday dinner table!) Aim for your announcement to be informational rather than evangelistic. You can trust God to open evangelistic doors later. For now, it’s time to couch things in sentences like this: “Mom, there’s something I think you should know about me. I’ve come to the place where I’ve decided to embrace Christianity as my faith.” Or, “Dad, I’ve become a Christian and it’s beginning to have some good effects in my life. It’s all rather new, but I thought I’d tell you early on, just so you’d know what’s going on.”