

Messy Evangelism

Confessions of a bumbling evangelist

by Jason Ropp

The Great Gingerbread House-Making Epiphany

I still have a chip on my shoulder from this past Christmas season. I was at an ugly Christmas sweater party. You would think that the title of the party would be self-explanatory. Attendees are supposed to find the most cheesy, awful Christmas sweater possible and wear it with pride. I was running low on cash at the time, so I didn't bother buying a sweater that I was only going to use once. As a result, I stuck out like a sore thumb. My attire was not cheesy and out of fashion, which is ironic; on any other occasion, that seems to be the case.

Whether I am in the proper attire or not, I tend to feel out of place at parties like these. There are so many people I do not know, and do not want to get to know, because I will never see them again. I hate superficial conversation, which is all that is allowed at this sort of get-together. I was begging for any chance to get away from the madness. Then it came: the Gingerbread House-Making Contest.

This was my chance—the chance to redeem myself for not having a sweater, the chance to restore honor to my family name. I immersed myself in the project. I put together my idea; it was simple, but it would be pristine.

I laughed as my enemies put together designs that were doomed to fail.

They were no match for my engineering prowess. Internal trusses, support walls, proper weight distribution—this was to be a masterpiece. Frank Lloyd Wright, eat your heart out.

I worked furiously, taking pride in my little masterpiece, until a sin-



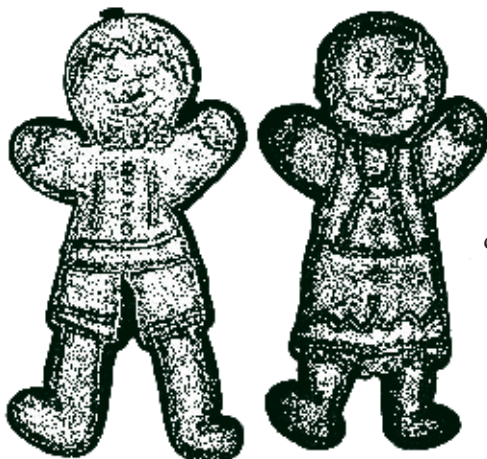
gle glance destroyed all of my motivation. I noticed the small simple project to my left. My heart sank. My generation is not about recognizing the hard-working, stick-to-the-book type of project. Originality, hilarity, obscurity—outside the box is the name of the game. To my left sat the real masterpiece, a small

boxlike gingerbread trailer house, complete with a covered porch and a Twizzler Dale Earnhardt number eight with racing stripes on the roof. I gave up. I felt I had wasted so much time in the project. To me, if it is not the best, if it will not win the day, if it is not perfect, then it is a waste of time and a failure. So goes the mantra of my life.

My life is all about comparing my work to the gingerbread trailer house next to me. I was not made to live like that, but the reality is that none of us are as we should be. When I am operating as Jesus meant me to, I am not comparing, I am not competing; I am just living, enjoying and serving. Unfortunately, I have not always lived under the love of Jesus. The shadow of what I should be has hung over the reality of who I am. I never felt that it was all right to fail, all right to learn, and all right to grow one step, even one mistake, at a time. At some point I gave up, or at least started the process of giving up, on my expectations and on the expectations of the Christian culture around me.

Billy and the Barrel

This all-or-nothing, performance-based, perfectionist attitude haunts the entirety of my faith: any sin I commit is a sign that I never really loved Jesus. A stingy moment with my money is proof that I am the greediest person



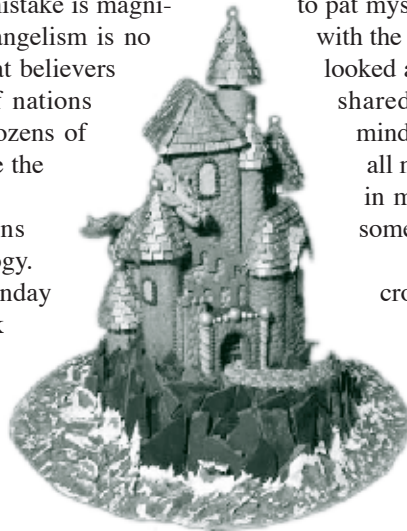
that walked the face of the earth. Every mistake is magnified, and every success downplayed. Evangelism is no exception. I am thoroughly convinced that believers in Christ should be sharing the hope of nations with unbelievers; unfortunately, I pass dozens of people each day with whom I fail to share the good news.

From an early age my expectations were honed to a beautiful, precise ideology. I remember stories that were read in Sunday School. These stories came with a book of giant illustrations printed on what looked like an oversized, multi-page Christmas card. Every story had some form of adversity that was resolved in a tidy way; if something did go wrong, the story conveniently and quickly moved to a later period in the life of the hero—or after his or her life—when one to five hundred people came to Christ.

One such story was about Billy, or Barny—some name beginning with B. We'll call him Billy. He was a homeless boy who lived in a barrel in an alley. In this story, if I remember it right, Billy happened to come upon a church meeting; through the meeting Billy came to know Jesus. He somehow ends up in the hospital dying, where he boldly tells the doctor and two nurses about Jesus. As most of these stories went, the medical trio could not resist such beautiful words from a dying child. In a tearful moment, all three accept Christ as the child passes peacefully into eternity. The kid goes to heaven and gets a crown with a jewel in it for each person he brought to Christ. What a beautiful picture of what evangelism should look like.

Somehow the possibility of death mingled with a spiritual bribe was supposed to motivate me to tell people about Jesus. All it did was make me feel bad that I was not like Billy, who had such an easy time telling people about Jesus. I was usually too scared to tell most adults my name. Why couldn't I be more like Billy? Maybe I should buy a barrel and almost die in it.

The well intentioned idealistic stories continued into high school through the medium of the mega-conference. Every one of these conferences has a young speaker who is outwardly everything a doofy-looking high schooler wants to be: 6'2", 180 lbs., muscular, looks like Brad Pitt, has some amazing, gelled-up hairdo. Whatever this guy says you are going to listen to, with the hope that you too can be this suave and attractive. "Brad Pitt" told me to stop looking at porn, to break up with my girlfriend, and to shout Jesus from the rooftops. Apparently he broke up with his girlfriend, stopped looking at porn, and brought thirty people at his high school to Christ, all in the same week. I responded appropriately: I did not have a girlfriend at the time so I got



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to pat myself on the back for not being suave enough with the ladies; I confessed to my youth pastor that I looked at porn; and I felt disappointed that I hadn't shared Jesus with anyone. But I made up my mind: change was here, and I was going to bring all my unbelieving friends to Christ. I had a fire in my heart and was ready to get out and save some souls.

Elaine, a girl I knew from 4-H, was in my crosshairs. God was with me; she didn't have a chance. The day after I got home, I built up the courage. I dialed the number and waited. I'm pretty sure Elaine knew what I was calling about, because the phone rang about fifty-five times before she finally picked up.

"Hello?" she said.

"Hey, uh.... Elaine. I needed to talk to you about something."

I think she thought I was going to tell her I liked her. "Ooo-kay, what is it?"

One deep breath. "I think you need to know that God loves you and doesn't want you to live your life of sin anymore and that you should accept Jesus as your savior and follow him because I really want you to know Him." I came up for air. "Do you want to?"

"Well, I'm just having too much fun in my life right now. Maybe I'll think about that later."

"Oh, ok.... bye."

"Bye."

I felt miserable. I had failed. Everyone I told about the ordeal heard something like, "Yeah, she just wants to live in her sinful life; but she said she would think about it, so I just need to keep being there for her."

I never talked to her about it again. That phone call has turned out to be one of the more successful attempts I have had at sharing the gospel.

I realize that God was pleased with my feeble attempt. I am sure He points that out as a moment of great pleasure, but I didn't recognize the pleasure. I had failed to reach the expectation that had been built in my mind. Those beautiful stories about the kid in the barrel seemed a

million miles away. I would not be getting that jewel in my crown, I did not save Elaine from the fiery pit of hell, and



with Jesus coming back any day now, I was running out of time. God was disappointed with me, and I was disappointed with myself.

So how can I do this? How will I ever be an “effective” evangelist? Am I doomed to spend the rest of my life constantly blundering through an experience in which I feel like I am failing? Will I always disappoint the one who died for me?

God loves people like crazy

I took a year off after high school. I spent the fall of 2004 in Bolivia, and in the spring of 2005, I worked for my grandparents’ construction company. That job was hard work and hard relationally. Some people are difficult to get along with, especially some of the Christians I worked with.

One time we were digging a ditch for a gutter drain, having a nice friendly conversation, when Scott, the Christian I did like working with, brought up a dilemma. Scott had some homosexual neighbors and was trying to figure out how to build relationships with them and love them without affecting his children in a negative way.

Jamille, the only unbeliever there at the time, started getting frustrated. “Why do Christians gotta always hate on gays... out there wavin’ around their ‘God hates fags’ signs... I think it is disgusting what those people do, but hey, it’s their business. Let gays live how they want to live.”

Another Christian, one of the ones I did not like too much, piped up. “I think we just need to stick them all on an island and torch it.”

I was speechless. I was angry. I saw the look on Jamille’s face. I thought about how he had defended me when one of the other Christians was really getting on my case. Jamille had laughed with me and shared with me his hurts about how hard it was being black and being married to a white woman. He told me how people would look at them sideways in the stores. The guy understood what it meant to be alienated by ‘normal’ people. He could sympathize with the homosexual community. At the same time, I knew homosexuality was wrong; I knew God loved these people like crazy, but hated the distortion of something beautiful He had made. I had to let this guy know.

I talked for about fifteen minutes. I chewed out the Christian guy—I’m not claiming this is Christlike, I am just telling you what happened—then I shared with Jamille how God loves gays, just as much as He loves him and me. I told



Jamille that God longs for them to have a right relationship with Him, and that he has compassion on them and extends mercy through Jesus. I told him that sin is sin, and that their sin of homosexuality creates the need for a savior in the same way that looking at porn does for me. Sin is sin and that is why we need Jesus. I shared the good news with Jamille that day; it was from the heart and it spoke into real life.

Jamille said he appreciated what I had said. We had a few more conversations in the following months.

He talked about attending church but never showed up. I didn’t really heckle him about it. If God was going to move in his life it would be on God’s time; I just walked next to the guy in the middle of real life and shared my heart. I was not pushing anything and I was not strategically steering conversations; they just came up and we would talk about the things that were important to us.

An ongoing story

Elisabeth Elliot wrote a novel a number of years ago called *No Graven Image*. In this book, a single young missionary heads off to minister to some Latin American Indians. This passionate young woman carries with her a basket full of idealistic dreams; she will convert the tribe and bring glory to the Lord. She sings in her heart ‘how beautiful are the feet of those who bring the good news.’ Such promise, such hope. By the end of the book, her only convert dies, the Indians mistrust her, and she no longer bothers to write to her church because she no longer has anything exciting to write about.

I wish I would have heard more stories like this when I was growing up, stories that left out the happily ever after ending. I do love hearing about people coming to Jesus, but I hear it so much that I stop believing it.

I do not have some happy ending for you, just an ongoing story. As far as I know, Jamille never came to Christ, and

except for a friend who already wanted to be a Christian but did not know how (she didn’t really even follow through on it), I still have not lead anyone to Jesus directly. This worries me less and less. I know I am not all that great at evangelism, but I am learning. Besides, it is God’s work. God works out his plans; He just invites me to participate in them. So I press on, most of the time in an awkward, unsure manner. It is not pretty, but life is not all that pretty. Why should evangelism be any different?

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I did talk with a Parsi Zoroastrian recently, a woman who works with my mother. She was surprised I knew anything about her people or religion—thank you, Rosedale Bible College. I mostly listened. I asked her questions about what she believed, and about how her life looked as a Parsi Zoroastrian. Turns out, as she told my mother later, she thoroughly enjoyed the conversation we had and was interested in hearing more about Rosedale. I was able to pass Reuben and Vicki Sairs' email along to her to start some dialogue. I hope that someday this woman will come to know the one I have a passionate love affair with—Jesus. Only time will tell.

Some things I've learned

So what has this bumbling evangelist learned along the way? What good is failure if it does not teach you something? I have, in fact, learned some things. They are simple things, but they have revolutionized the way I look at evangelism.

I love the line from Rich Mullins' song *Surely God Is with Us* that says of Jesus: "All the whores, they seem to love him, and all the drunks propose a toast." I want to be around sinners. I want to love them, laugh with them, cry with them, share my heart with them. I want relationships with people like Jamille. I want to know what hurts them, so I can introduce that hurt to the healing lover Jesus.

I find it counterproductive when Christians look for a job that has a great work environment. This usually means having lots of Christians around, a boss who is Christian, "Family Friendly Christian Music!" playing over the speakers, and a ten percent direct deposit from their paycheck to their church if they want. The Christian job is not the only thing desired; people want Christian friends, parties with those Christian friends, Christian coffee shops, Christian book clubs, and of course, they want to make sure that their kids only have friends who are Christians as well. How can I ever really care about unbelievers' lives if the only reason I talk to them is to tell them about Jesus? I need to be surrounding myself with those who do not know Jesus, not those who already do.

First suggestion: Take a job where you are the only Christian. Join a book club with unbelievers. Join a non-church league sports team; it is the same thing as a church league but with less swearing. Surround yourself with the lost.

Second suggestion: You have to earn the right to speak into a person's life. One day I was walking to class at IU South Bend. There was a nice man with a ponytail and way too tight pants who kindly handed a pamphlet to me. I tend to be a people-pleaser so I took it and stuck it in my pocket. When I looked at it later I chuckled a bit. It was a pamphlet by PETA talking about the poor treatment of animals. The mix of the guy making me go through the awkward conversation alongside of a pamphlet that asks me to go against one of the fundamentals of my faith (I love the bumper sticker,

"If God wanted us to be vegetarians, why did he make animals out of meat?") was just too much. He did not have a chance of changing my mind.

What if the guy would have been my friend? What if he would have loved me and cared for me, cared about my life, cared about what hurt me, and cared about the reasons why I could not possibly think of eating only vegetables? What if he would have made me vegan meals that tasted amazing and showed me that maybe his way of living was not so crazy after all? Maybe he might have a chance of changing my mind.

We do the same thing. We hand out the pamphlet, we tell them that a couple of naked people ate an apple and weeds started growing, and because of those naked people who were tricked by a talking snake we need a right relationship with Jesus, who was 100% God and 100% man, who died so we do not have to die when we die. If you just heard that for the first time, you might think it was a little weird, too.

What if instead of handing out the pamphlet, we talk to someone we work with? We spend time with them every day, maybe go out with them after work and talk with them about their family: about how things are rough at home, how they love their kids but are just so angry all the time, how they thought they had everything they wanted but it still isn't enough. If we walk alongside them, going through some of the same problems, yet somehow having peace about the whole thing, and somehow understanding what real love is, maybe that story about the snake and the apple and the God-man won't seem so crazy any more.

Finally, for me, evangelism is awkward, messy, scary, and seemingly ineffective when I actually share. You will not get it right, you will not do things perfectly, and you may get too scared to do anything on a regular basis. Thank goodness for grace. Think about the disciples. Peter spent three years with Jesus and still denied him. He went on to bring thousands to Christ. Being a disciple of Christ is a growing process. Whether you are fifteen, forty-five, or eighty, it is still a growing process; trust God to grow you.

We are disciples as well; we are learning. Just like Peter, we will say some spot on things, like when he called Jesus the son of God. And at other times, like Peter, we will be way off: three verses later, Peter rebuked Jesus for talking about death.

Rest in Jesus, surround yourself with the lost, love the lost, and be humble enough to fail. After all, failure teaches us things. **BB**



Jason Ropp graduated from Rosedale Bible College in 2007 with an AA in Biblical Studies. He has completed a nine-month pastoral internship at Maple City Chapel in Goshen, Indiana and is currently serving as enrollment services assistant at RBC. Jason says he plans to pursue a degree in creative writing in "as secular an environment as possible."