

*The Art of Personal Evangelism*. By Will McRaney, Jr. Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2003, 268 pp., \$19.99 paper.

In his introduction McRaney stated his purpose was “to blow the dust off the biblical essentials” of personal evangelism and help the reader “connect the timeless message of the past with the postmodern culture of the present in which God means everything and nothing.” This purpose involves the challenge of synthesizing the two very diverse tasks of clarification and contextualization.

In his preface McRaney shared a personal desire to “assist in reversing the church’s decline in the latter part of the twentieth century in many parts of the Western world” in personal evangelism. In order to attack this goal, he designed a book that was more “instructional than inspirational” and attempted to balance “the foundations and theories from which all of evangelism must flow, while providing principles and practical tips in communicating our rich message.” Convergence is key in understanding the intent of his work.

In order to evaluate the effectiveness with which McRaney has accomplished his purpose, one must distill his various intentions. By distillation one can say McRaney intended to establish the biblical essentials of personal evangelism while integrating them into the art of effective communication in a postmodern age. Inherent in this goal was the desire to stimulate a resurgence of personal evangelism among Christians. The first step in accomplishing one’s purpose is to clearly sight the target. McRaney drew his target into sharp focus.

The second step in accomplishing one’s goal is defining a systematic path to the desired end. McRaney was methodical in his pursuit of his stated purpose. One recognizes the presence of a structured approach painstakingly followed. McRaney regularly summarized previous statements and added logical bridges to introduce the next idea. This pattern of summarization, confirmation, and introduction was in a sense an embodiment of the method of communication, he advocated in *The Art of Personal Evangelism*. He took one step forward, confirmed the reader made the logical advance, and then proffered the next step.

While McRaney accomplished his goals of clarification and contextualization, it remains to be seen whether or not this will result in assisting the church in revitalizing the art of personal evangelism. Nevertheless, bringing the biblical message of salvation into focus for postmodern world was vital.

McRaney drew together salient and succinct insights from other authors in the field of evangelism. This synthesis of thought was helpful. He provided practical tools for becoming a more effective personal witness for Christ. McRaney’s greatest contribution may have been his adeptness in merging timelessness, timeliness, and effectiveness into one practical resource.

McRaney dealt with the critical connection between God’s activity and man’s responsibility in communicating the gospel message. From the inception McRaney emphasized evangelism as the initiative of God and carried out through the agency of man. He described a dynamic partnership that culminates in redemption. He portrayed this great gift as occurring at the intersection of human instrumentality, natural circumstance, and distinct, even divine, timing. According to McRaney God is the source and man is the course of evangelism.

McRaney emphasized that effective communication of the gospel is the full responsibility of individual witnesses. Quoting Rich Richardson, McRaney suggested that gaining credibility during this postmodern era is more related to the witness identifying with the hurts and needs of the recipient than presenting the message with authoritative answers. Since these days contain both modern and postmodern perspectives on life, one wonders whether this dichotomy is as sharp as it might seem. Could it be that both communicating a confident and authoritative message while humbly identifying with the needs of others may coalesce effectively to enhance the witness's credibility. Could it be that authority and humility converge at various degrees on a case-by-case basis?

McRaney's drew on the foundational principles of evangelism as identified by D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones to underscore the witness's responsibility for effectiveness in ministry. A second resource used in pursuing effectiveness in personal evangelism was Engel's scale of spiritual progression. McRaney advanced the thesis that effectiveness in the act of personal evangelism involves the appropriate use of a variety of roles, methods, and styles used intentionally to address the needs of the individual recipient. His thrust was that effectiveness is the sole responsibility of the witness. The greater measure of effectiveness was the benefit afforded the recipient.

McRaney presented two questions identifying the essentials of an evangelistic witness: (1) What are the essential elements of the gospel message? (2) What is necessary to respond to that message in such a way as to result in salvation and transformation? He addressed the provocative idea that all presentations of gospel are somewhat flawed by the encoding and decoding process of communication. He viewed these communication flaws as not substantially obscuring the fundamental truth of the message. He defined the essentials of the message as dealing with a right understanding of the identity of God, of the message of salvation, of the need of man, of faith in Christ, and of advancing the message and mission of Christ.

McRaney focused on matters related to the effective communication of the gospel message. He used the negative springboard of what communication is not, to establish the positive principles of effective communication. The positive principles dealt with looked at styles of communication, verbal and non-verbal communication, and designing the presentation of the message to convey clearly the content of the message. In describing the context of postmodernism, McRaney described the unique filters that effect communication and the channels by which knowledge is received.

As McRaney brought practical application to the forefront, he relied on other authors to draw crisp distinctions between those operating from modern and postmodern perspectives. He addressed the cross-cultural aspect of communicating the gospel particularly in relationship to children, youth, and senior adults.

McRaney sharpened the edge of communication by suggesting specific communication tips useful for one sharing the gospel in a postmodern age. These tips included an emphasis on multiple dialogical listener-centered encounters that incorporate the gospel story. He emphasized the skill of learning to communicate by asking helpful and practical questions. He advised relational integration over isolation, softness over loudness, consideration over argumentation, and guided tours of the meaning of Christianity over the quick selling of the ticket of salvation. He also called for more emphasis on earthly benefits, increased relational validation, and more

time for planting the gospel seed. As McRaney closed this section he presented many suggestions for verbal transition from the experiential arena of life to the benefits of a relationship with Christ.

McRaney's final two chapters dealt with removing barriers within the witnesses, within the recipients, and around the recipients of the witness. He added insights related to gender-specific witnessing, responding to "no," following up on a positive response, and training individuals in personal evangelism in a postmodern age. He drew his text to a close by adding practical appendices pragmatically answering the question, "Now what?"

McRaney's book has not been a helter skelter theological attack on a disintegrating society, but rather a steady surgical address bringing the gospel to this contemporary lost generation. One of the more beneficial aspects of the work was the way in which McRaney modeled a pattern of dialogue by asserting a truth, confirming that truth, and then advancing from that truth. He wrote with the same pattern that he advocated for the one who would seek to share Christ in this increasingly postmodern world.

Throughout the reading of *The Art of Personal Evangelism* a series of thoughts completing the phrase, "a good book" continued to come into a focus. A good book serves as an "on-ramp" to other good books. A good book challenges old thoughts and unlocks new thoughts. A good book evokes questions and provides answers. A good book enables one to see what others have seen. A good book produces sharp contrasts and clear focus. McRaney has written a good book.

The strongest alternative reaction to McRaney's work came in response to the discussion of success in personal evangelism. While McRaney developed a strong argument for communicating effectively based on the need of the recipient, a stronger motivation may be in David Martyn Lloyd-Jones emphasis on the glory of God.

Surely success in personal evangelism is more than sharing the message and leaving the results to God. However, should success pivot on the response of another? The witness must be motivated to improve his or her effectiveness in order to fulfill the supreme object of the work of evangelism – glorifying God. The glory of God stirs the witness to continuously improve in witness and ministry. Surely, "Do all to the glory of God," (1 Cor. 10:31, KJV) applies to personal evangelism.

For the purpose of this book, McRaney defined two basic types of evangelistic encounters: (1) On-going encounters, and (2) One-time encounters. This distinction caused the reader to wonder whether other means of defining types of personal evangelism might result in additional insight. Can evangelistic encounters be differentiated based on those that result in the revelation of God's grace, while other encounters result in the revelation of God's glory? Can evangelistic encounters be evaluated based on those that draw one nearer to God and those that move one further away from God? Can evangelistic witnesses be examined as messages of confrontation and messages of confirmation? Further reflection may be helpful here.

McRaney's quoted Newbigin calling for local congregations to renounce all introverted concern for their own lives or purposes. This stimulated the desire to pray and to search the scriptures for ways to turn the eyes of the church back to the harvest.

Considering the idea that all people innately possess a personal, often jumbled, theology has created a desire to use questions in evangelistic encounters. Possibly a better use of questions could soften the soil for the implanting of the gospel. Possibly questions could convey a great interest in hearing the heart and need of the individual. Possibly questions have been used too often as merely a means to set up a statement rather than a means to connect with a person.

One of the more provocative comments McRaney offered was the notion that all gospel presentations are flawed. This idea provoked a desire to become less flawed in communicating the message of new life in Christ. Likewise, this observation challenged the witness to become more alert to the common human filters that contribute flaws to such a vital message.

The degree to which one must give up efficiency in personal evangelism in order to impact the lives of others has been an area of reflection. Few resources are more valuable than time, however nothing is more valuable than one's soul. The question was stirred, "How can one distinguish the inordinate and frivolous waste of time from the appropriate and wise investment of time in the lives of others?" This question prompted a personal self-evaluation.

McRaney established a strong case that evangelism in a postmodern age requires an increased emphasis on the earthly as opposed to the eternal benefits. This perspective caused the reader to seek to develop a series of messages revolving around the theme, "Why Believe?" The goal of this message series will be to identify from scripture stories of transformation in the daily lives of those responding in faith to the gospel message.

*The Art of Personal Evangelism* served to prod and prompt while simultaneously beckoning and calling the reader forward. McRaney's book was a source of conviction and a source of encouragement.

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