

“Here’s Cal Worthington and his dog, Spot!” By Shawn Young

In subtle ways, I’ve picked up the wrong image of an effective evangelist. I’ve listened to the witty lines and slick responses of some well-known evangelists and tried to come up with my own versions. My assumption has been that Joe Unbeliever has no desire or interest in spiritual things (much less in Jesus), and it is my job to *give* him that interest; either by pointing out the unhappiness in his life (“You’ve GOT to be unhappy about something!”) or suggesting that we Christians have something that he doesn’t (peace that passes all understanding, joy beyond description, love that gushes and overflows). Of course, I’m not a total dufus—I know that pointing out Joe Unbeliever’s weaknesses, failures and dissatisfaction with life would make me seem arrogant and presumptuous. Besides, I’ve always felt dishonest about claiming to have never-ending peace, joy and love when my everyday experience is, um, different. So what am I supposed to do? I’ve been stifled by this dilemma.

When I was a boy, I used to park myself in front of the TV every Saturday morning to watch my favorite cartoons and dozens of Cal Worthington commercials. Cal looked like a Texas tycoon, dressed in a flashy western suit and big cowboy hat. A twangy country jingle played as a voice announced, “Here’s Cal Worthington and his dog, Spot!” Cal would show off his “dog” spot—which never was a dog, but usually a tiger or an elephant or an ostrich—and then in his smooth, southern drawl, he would rattle off the fantastic deals of the week. He sold thousands of cars this way. I thought his cars were heaps of junk, but the ostrich was pretty cool.

It recently dawned on me (much to my nausea) that I’ve thought of evangelism as a sales job. First, you create slick and attractive packaging that appeals to your target population. Then you have to create a “felt need” for your product. You’ve got to convince the customer that they need what you’re selling, even if they don’t *need* it at all. Once you’ve done that, you have to persuade them that your product can meet this need better than anything else on the market. That’s not easy—the competition is fierce. But if you can convince them that your product will somehow make their life better, more comfortable and safe, then there’s a pretty good chance they will sign on the dotted line. Some “sales agents” will also try to minimize the cost in order to get the sale. Whatever it takes. For the good salesperson, it’s all about closing the deal.

The problems with this paradigm are obvious. Jesus is not a *product*. So many products in our world are unnecessary—but Jesus is absolutely essential. And if we minimize or negate the cost of following Jesus, we are being terribly dishonest. I’m sure this is why many new believers become confused or disillusioned when they eventually read that, “you have been given not only the privilege of trusting in Christ but also the privilege of suffering for him” (Phil. 1:29). The “packaging” we try to put Jesus in might make him appear more attractive to the target population, but the fact that we try so hard to dress up our Savior and make Him soft or “relevant” shows that we think our Product can’t sell Itself, as it were. Our lack of confidence that people will see His built-in quality must be insulting to Him!

Is it my job to “sell” Jesus? Is an evangelist basically a used-car salesman for the Lord?

Jesus made it clear that people can’t come to him unless the Father *draws* them to him. (Jn. 6:44, 65). He said that his job was to speak the words of life (Jn. 6:63), keep all those whom the Father had given him (Jn. 6:39), and give them eternal life. Clearly, the Father was involved in a person’s spiritual journey before Jesus got to them! As an Evangelist, Jesus cooperated with the Father and completed what the Father was already doing in the life of a seeker. That’s why Jesus did not have to “sell” himself to people. Did he use language and images that were pertinent, meaningful and relevant? Absolutely. But he wasn’t trying to conjure up a spiritual

interest that wasn't *already there*. He spoke about the living bread from heaven because he wanted to bring forth those whom God had given him, those with a genuine hunger for life in union with God. He was looking for spiritual vital signs—for a pulse. In the process of keeping those people God had given him, Jesus also caused those who had no spiritual hunger to move on (John 6:66). That's what the Father sent him to do.

I find this news liberating. Jesus wasn't a slick salesman—he wasn't selling himself, or the kingdom, or God. He was locating those who *already belonged* to him. He was giving substance to the indescribable hunger that true seekers have. He was putting words to their deep thirst. He was explaining why they felt strangely drawn to him. As an evangelist, I do not have the responsibility to create a hunger for eternal life. That's not my job. I am only sent to point people to Jesus, let them hear his words of life, see him as he is, and check for signs of spiritual life. The whole endeavor of “converting” someone is a mistake. God converts people; I merely locate them and help them understand and trust what they are already experiencing. There is much explaining for an evangelist to do, much to clarify about what it means to believe and follow Jesus. We must challenge seekers to make decisive steps of faith, and we must be willing to really listen to their questions. But there is no burden to create a spiritual interest that isn't there.

How would I approach evangelism differently with this new paradigm?

First, I would **stop worrying** so much about whether I have the right approach. Either they are being drawn to Jesus or they aren't—and I can't do anything to change that. I can only help the person determine whether they are spiritually alive or not, and what to do next.

Second, I would focus much less on **persuading** and more on the signs of spiritual hunger and thirst. I would ask direct and honest questions like, “Do you ever think about God?” “What do you like or not like about God?” “Do you ever wonder what He thinks of you?”

Third, I would be less focused on “closing the deal”. We evangelicals think that if we can get someone to regurgitate our canned sinner's prayer, we have undeniable proof that they have crossed over from death to everlasting life. Most of us won't even consider a person saved unless they can pinpoint the day, hour and very minute they “invited Jesus into their heart”. We are obsessed with getting people to say “The Prayer”. The way we use it is wrong. We use “The Prayer” as a rite of passage, an admission ticket into our club, or worse—an accomplishment for our spiritual résumé. But Jesus never insisted on a prescribed prayer. That's because belief called for different things from different people. For the disciples, it meant leaving their nets and following Jesus all over the country. For a Roman centurion, belief meant returning home with nothing but Jesus' word that his son would live. For a Samaritan woman, it meant telling her whole town that Jesus was the Messiah. The signs of belief were different for everyone in the gospels. I want to be careful not to make people jump through my particular hoops to prove that they believe. A person doesn't belong to God because they said the prayer—they belong to God because God drew them to Jesus, and they believed in him, so they *have his life in them*.

Although people don't have to say “The Prayer” to clinch the deal, praying out their belief in Jesus may be one of several crucial steps a seeker takes as they trust more of themselves to Jesus. It's healthy to express our belief with words—it strengthens our faith. But by no means is “The Prayer” the pinnacle of our spiritual journey. Seekers need to be taught and even challenged to trust, follow, surrender, obey and remain in Jesus. Isn't that the same for any believer? Isn't that what we do for the rest of our lives on earth? Jesus offers us *a life* in union with God, not an admission pass. Evangelists don't sell admission tickets to heaven; they point to Jesus, the source of immediate and eternal life.

Pulse Questions

- Where do you find joy in your life?
- What gives you a sense of security? Stability?
- Where do you find beauty?
- What is so meaningful that you would give your all-out effort to it?
- What is the most intriguing adventure in your life right now?
- What's one thing you wish for?
- Are there any signs in your life that God might actually care about you?
- If God wanted to get your attention or say something to you, how would you know it?
- What would be the greatest possible thing God could say to you? What would you most like to hear?
- Do you ever pray? How does it feel?
- What do you think it means to be spiritual?
- If there was a way to be really close to God without "converting to Christianity", would you be interested?