

Five Steps to a Faith that Works Step 5 - Sharing Faith

When I think about sharing my faith, what comes to mind is the childhood activity of “**Show and Tell.**” In school, we were invited to bring something to school and show it to the class and talk about it.

Sharing our faith is not just about telling. In fact, I think it is better if it is more about showing than telling. In the history of Christianity, sometimes there has been too much talking about our faith in God, and in Jesus, and too little demonstrating what that faith really entails.

Talking Point

- **What positive or negative experiences have you had with others who wanted to share their faith with you?**
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Christians have sometimes acted as if sharing one’s faith means coercing and converting others through any means necessary. It is a sad thing to recall, but there have been whole communities of people who were forced to convert to Christianity at gunpoint or with the threat of death. Conquerors of the new world, in particular, brought priests with them to subjugate people not only in terms of their lands and resources, but minds and hearts.

In other times, and even today, people have thought that spreading the gospel is about winning an argument, about convincing people of the superiority of our faith. To share faith, in other words is to wring a confession out of someone, to get them to sign on the dotted line, to say the right phrase, to pray the right prayer.

In contrast, I think of the Christian song, “They’ll Know We Are Christians By Our Love.” Showing love, doing justice, caring about our neighbors, is a great way to start sharing our faith.

Jesus *demonstrated* love. He healed people, and included people who were rejected or overlooked. He acted and then he talked about it. When people were healed, he often took no credit, saying “*your* faith has made you well.”

Jesus showed us who God is in his life, his ministry, and in his words. In Alcoholics Anonymous they say the way to share the gifts of sobriety found through “the Program” is “attraction, not promotion.” Jesus never promoted himself. He didn’t have to! People were attracted to his way of being, to his deeds and to his way of talking about God. He didn’t have to sell anything. He didn’t need a marketing campaign. His life and way of treating others was his marketing campaign.

Sharing our faith may be something we do casually, or more formally. Not many of us will ever have the opportunity to preach, or to “testify” about our faith publicly, before a group. Most sharing of faith occurs one-to-one, in quiet, behind the scenes way.

Lay people are the best ones to do it. People expect a preacher to have faith, and are not always comfortable talking about their faith, or lack of it, to a “professional!”

But lay people have a unique opportunity; at work, at school, with our family and friends, to share in a more casual way.

Talking Point

- **Share with the group:**
 - 1. What action in your life could cause Jesus to say, "your faith has made you well."**
 - 2. How can you show who God is in your life?**

How do you share your faith? Here are five ways:

1) Remember that wherever you are, as a Christian, you are not only a follower of Jesus Christ, but you are *a partner with Jesus in ministry*. You are a part of the Body of Christ, and you may be the only “Bible” some people ever read. You may be the only person of “faith” that some people know personally. People are aware of how you act and speak, believe it or not. They will judge you and your “faith” long before you have an opportunity to explain it or speak about it.

Your actions speak louder than words. People learn to trust us when there is coherence between our actions and our words. When we show love and respect and consideration; when we go “the extra mile;” when we reach out to someone who is hurting or having a bad day. I remember a phrase I learned as a young person: “If you were arrested today for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?”

2) *Be willing to identify yourself as a person of faith.* Sometimes people do this in a flashy way that lets you know they think they are superior, better than others, because they are a “Christian.” They wear so much Christian jewelry, have so many Christian bumper stickers (some of which can be very off-putting) – it is like they are wearing a big, neon sign that says “I’ve got it, you don’t; I’m going to heaven, you’re not!” Some Christians almost act insecure, as if they think that if they don’t advertise in a big way, no one would ever guess that they are a person of faith! They won’t know we are Christians by our bumper stickers, but by our love.

Jesus had an interesting, mysterious practice of keeping his messiah-ship a secret. He even told people not to tell others once they figured it out! People have speculated for a long time about why Jesus did this. Was it reverse psychology? Was he just trying to stay alive long enough to show and tell enough? Or, maybe he was really trying a stealth method of evangelism (another word for sharing faith). Maybe Jesus wanted people to see and decide for themselves without so much advanced publicity.

I enjoy it more sometimes when people do not know right away that I am a minister. Once people know that, they may treat me differently. Before they know that, I am just a person, like

them. Whatever I do or say is not interpreted through that lens. I have a different kind of opportunity, then, to share my faith. Sometimes the labels interfere.

The same applies to those of us who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender – it is interesting to have the experience of people getting to know us first before they know the label. We have an opportunity for someone to have a different experience than their stereotypes. It is a powerful witness.

This is true of sharing faith. Let people get to know us, to see how we act and *who* we are, before we share *whose* we are! Not that we want to be “closet” Christians, but we don’t want to drive people away with our advance publicity, either.

Talking Point

- **Share with the group:**
 - 1. Have you ever thought of yourself as a "partner with Jesus in ministry?"**
 - 2. How does this impact your understanding of yourself as a person of faith?**

3) *Be willing to respond to pointed questions.* It is a rare thing for someone to ask us directly about faith. But when someone does: “Do you believe in God?”, “What church do you go to?”, “Can you really be gay and Christian?”; it is a great privilege to share from your heart. We are told that in those moments, we will always be given the words to say. We do not have to have a prepared text, or pat answers. We just need to look them in the eye, smile and share from our heart.

I was on an airplane once, on New Year’s Eve, with a man who eventually told me he was on the plane because his wife had died and every holiday he spends just flying around the country to avoid the pain of having lost her. Later in our conversation he learned that I was a minister. He asked me if I knew where his wife was. I took that golden opportunity, looked him in the eye, touched his hand and said, “I believe with all my heart, that she is with God and that *you* can trust God for that.” It is my hope that he saw my presence with him that day as a sign, and that our conversation brought him some comfort and peace. Someday, someone may ask you a poignant question like that. Don’t be afraid to answer from your heart.

4) *Be prepared.* Sometimes we do have the opportunity to stand up for what we believe in the face of hostility or opposition. I remember, years ago, being coached before debating Jerry Falwell on the Ron Reagan, Jr. Show. What was important was not trying to convince Jerry Falwell of anything! I was not holding my breath about that. But what was important was the folks who were watching both of us, and listening to both of us. What did they see? Did I come across angry, defensive? I was coached to avoid answering his questions, just be sure to make my own point instead. That was amazing – he would ask me a question, and I would just turn it around and say what I most wanted to say to those listening!

I smiled. I was gentle, kind, firm and humorous. I even got Jerry Falwell to laugh at one point. I

wanted people to see a lesbian Christian who was not afraid or intimidated, who was confident, and who trusted God. That image, even more than my precise words, gave a message. I was not worried about Jerry Falwell, that notorious homophobe. He is not my judge or my savior. He is a human being, a pastor, with some mistaken ideas about me and my community. He is also a child of God.

How can we be prepared when we are not going on TV? First of all, if you are a lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender Christian, it is not a bad thing for you to know something about the subject of "Homosexuality and the Bible." If you even know a little, you will know a lot more than most people, including people who think the Bible condemns homosexuality!

Mostly, however, we are prepared by praying and learning over long periods of time. By gradually getting more familiar with our faith as a whole, not only the parts that apply to our particular circumstances. We get prepared by becoming a person of faith and prayer ourselves. By working on our relationship with God and by gaining more confidence in God and ourselves.

Pray for opportunities to show your faith, and to be able to talk about it.

Just try that for one week, and see what happens to you!

5) *Take risks.* I think of lesbian couples who were married on the steps of the City Hall in Sarasota, FL. They not only came out as lesbians, but as church-goers! I remember the interview with one couple, Sue and Sheila, in which they said they listened to Christian radio. Picture the people who listen to Christian radio feeling shocked to learn that! If they had said, "I go to gay bars, I watch 'Ellen' and 'Will and Grace'" no one would have paid attention. . .but, Christian radio?

Years ago, In Los Angeles, there were two women from the church who were electricians. They were working on the home of two lesbians. Frequently they spoke of the church, about singing in the choir, about church activities. Finally, one of the women whose home was being repaired burst out "Aren't you ever going to invite us to your church? Or is it a big secret?"

In a way, the two electricians were embarrassed that they had not yet gotten around to inviting them. On the other hand, it worked a little like that "messianic secret." Imagine if right off the bat they had begun pressuring these women to come to church. It might have really turned them off, intimidated them. Instead, they got to know about these women, and learned a little about what goes on at church, without pressure. They got to see how these women acted. They liked what they saw, or they wouldn't have asked the big question.

Talking Point

- **Share with the group:**
 1. **In what ways have you become more familiar with your faith during this study?**
 2. **If you could ask God for opportunities to share you faith, who would you ask God to touch?**
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People are wary of churches, and of aggressive sales tactics. I have met so many people who act afraid to come to church, who say they are “spiritual” but not “religious” (which means “leave me alone, I don’t do church!”). When they say that, I sometimes joke back, “Me, too – I’m not very “religious” either– neither are a lot of people who come to the church!”

I think by “religious” they mean pious or Bible-toting/thumping, self-righteous, boring, and other unflattering attributes. It is amazing to share with people that in our church you can relax, you can be yourself, and that you can “take what you like and leave the rest.”

And we have fun! Hopefully, we don’t take ourselves too seriously, and provide a safe space for people to grow in their faith, at their own pace.

We don’t preach or teach that our church is the only church, or the only church that has the truth; or that our faith is the only path of faith. We don’t tell people that they are dying and going to hell if they don’t do it our way.

We do say that God is present with us, and in us, and that God wants us to *show* the love that Jesus’ lived, and to *tell* others when we have the opportunity.

Is there someone in your world who you think is struggling with their faith? Someone who needs a spiritual friend or companion? Do you feel self-confident enough to offer spiritual friendship in a non-intimidating way?

How is your spiritual “self-esteem?”

Is there someone you know who is ready to be invited to church? A good way to do that is to first invite them to dinner, a concert or to a social event that is non-churchy. Sometimes, watching church people just enjoy themselves, being human and ordinary makes seeing them in church on Sunday less overwhelming.

Rev. Delores Berry sings an old gospel song. “I Said I Wasn’t Gonna Tell Nobody, But I Couldn’t Keep It to Myself!” If we found a wonderful new toothpaste, or great store to shop at, or a fabulous, out of the way restaurant, we wouldn’t hesitate to tell our friends or co-workers. But we are awfully shy about church, sometimes, even if we are not closeted!

To be a follower of Jesus means to let our faith show and our light shine. Not so that it blinds others, but so that it attracts and draws them to the same One whose love we have received and whose amazing grace has set us free.

Talking Point

- **Share with the group:**
 1. **How am I moving to a place of deepening faith, doing justice and embracing joy?**
 2. **How can I “Show and tell” my faith?**
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SHARING FAITH

Before praying briefly for one another, share in a sentence or two in what ways this study has been helpful to you find a "grown up" faith.