

JIM PETERSEN  
**LIVING  
PROOF**



SHARING THE  
GOSPEL NATURALLY

Well, I thought it was simple. But often the response was blank stares. I felt as though I was trying to describe an invisible world as I talked.

When after two years we returned to Brazil, my concern had grown. By then I felt I had verified my first impressions of a shift in spiritual climate, and I had managed enough personal involvement with unchurched people to be convinced of their openness to Christ. But I knew I had not managed to communicate what I was seeing and feeling. That was when I decided to write *Evangelism as a Lifestyle*. I thought that if I could lay the whole thing out in a book, I might get my message across. I wrote the book, committed it to God and to the publisher, and went on to other things. I thought I had said what I had to say about evangelism.

Then letters started coming. Apparently I had transmitted my basic message to the readers, but I had not provided enough practical guidance for anyone to be able to do anything about it. I was glad we were living 7,000 miles away! Then I received a many-paged letter from a Navigator in California, Peter Gerhard. I had never met him. His letter consisted of one "how-to" question after another. As I read it I thought, *It will take another book to answer this letter!* That's when I wrote *Evangelism for Our Generation*.

Soon after *Evangelism for Our Generation* was published, Joe Coggeshall of CBMC (Christian Businessmen's Committee) wrote me about using the two books as the basis for a video seminar. He told me NavPress and CBMC were interested in doing this as a joint project. It took me over a year to warm up to the idea. Then when I did, Pat McMillan suggested that it would sure be nice if I would integrate both books into a single text! That suggestion wasn't entirely new, as I had already heard it from a few seminary professors. But with my current responsibilities, it just seemed impossible. I turned to Jake Barnett.

Jake has worked with me line by line in the writing of both *Evangelism as a Lifestyle* and *Evangelism for Our Generation*. Without Jake's encouragement and deft assistance, I doubt that I would ever have produced anything in writing. Jake offered to integrate the two texts for me. He teamed up with my old mentor, Ed Reis, and shortly they presented me with a rough draft. I disappeared with the draft, worked it over, and then got back to Jake. Together we gave it a final polishing. *Living Proof* has emerged out of this process.

The material in this book is the product of thirty years of doing a lot of things wrong and a few things right. My sources have been the Bible, my nonbelieving friends (and foes), my colleagues, and a few good books. I can't sign off without mentioning a few very special friends who were fellow-learners with me: Ken Lottis, Oswaldo Simões, Aldo Berndt, Fernando Gonzalez and Mário Nitsche. Any one of these people could have written this book.

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## INTRODUCTION

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# NEW INSIGHTS ON TRADITIONAL EVANGELISM

Evangelism Bound by Tradition

In 1963 my family traveled by ship from the United States to Brazil. The trip marked a new beginning. We expected that. We did not expect that the sixteen days aboard ship would, in themselves, mark the beginning of discoveries that are still going on. This book is an attempt to pass on what I have been learning about evangelism since that trip.

There were 120 passengers on the ship. Half were tourists, and half were missionaries—including us. Sixty missionaries and sixty tourists! A one-to-one ratio for sixteen days. Since there isn't much to do aboard ship other than walk, read, or converse, I couldn't imagine how any tourist could get through that trip without receiving a thorough exposure to the Christian message. More ideal conditions for evangelism couldn't exist.

During the first three days, my wife and I spent our time relating to the other passengers. Conversations were unhurried, and soon we found ourselves deeply involved in discussing Christ with our new acquaintances.

On the third day, I thought that if the other fifty-eight missionaries were doing what we were, we would have a serious case of overkill. I decided to check with the others about coordinating our efforts. My first opportunity came when I encountered six missionaries sitting together on the deck. I joined them and expressed my concern, suggesting we get our signals straight so we wouldn't overwhelm the passengers.

I had totally misjudged the problem. When I explained what was on my mind, the six just looked at one another. Apparently, it hadn't occurred to them to talk to the other sixty passengers about Christ. Finally one said, "We just graduated from seminary and didn't learn how to do that sort of

thing there." Another said, "I don't know. I have sort of a built-in reservation against the idea of conversion." A third said, "I've been a pastor for three years, but I've never personally evangelized anyone. I don't think I know how either."

I remember saying that if we, in sixteen days and with a one-to-one ratio, couldn't awaken these sixty people to the gospel, we might as well forget about the ninety-five million Brazilians. Perhaps it would be just as well if we would all catch the next boat north.

A few hours later there was a knock on our cabin door. I opened it to find three of the six I had just been talking to. They had come to tell me that they had obtained permission from the captain to conduct a Sunday service for the ship's crew and that they wanted me to preach the sermon.

As they elaborated on their plan, I was reminded of a conversation I'd had three weeks before with a friend's pastor. The pastor told me his congregation had recently begun witnessing. He said the young people were going to the old folks' home each Sunday to conduct a service. Some of the men were holding weekly jail services, after which they would counsel prisoners individually.

Obviously, there is nothing wrong with conducting services in jails and rest homes, but if such things alone constitute the main evangelistic thrust of a body of Christians it raises a problem. I asked the pastor, "Aren't you running the risk of teaching your congregation that the gospel is only for those in unfortunate circumstances—for those who are relatively unthreatening to us? Shouldn't Christians learn to carry the message to their peers, to go after people on their own level?"

I expressed the same concern to the three missionaries in my cabin. We could slip into the same mental trap aboard ship. I said, "Your consciences were pricked by what we talked about. So now you've spotted the unfortunate sailors who never go to church and have planned a service for them. That is good, but I don't think we can escape from our responsibility to the passengers."

They got the point, but they had already committed themselves to conducting a service for the crew. The captain posted a notice in the crew's quarters, and arrangements had been made to use the galley. I agreed to attend, but not to speak.

The four of us arrived in the galley on schedule. It was empty. Occasionally a sailor would have to go through the room in the course of his duties. He would dart through quickly, obviously intent on not getting caught. Finally, one sailor came in and sat down. He was a Baptist. So we had the service: four missionaries and one Baptist sailor!

After that, my three friends began to think in terms of going to the tourists.

There was an elderly Christian couple among the passengers. It was the husband's birthday, so the three missionaries organized an old-fashioned sing to commemorate the occasion. Sensing what was coming and not wanting to jeopardize my relationships with the people I was getting to know, I felt it wiser to stay away. When the time came for the program, I was up on the third deck. One other passenger was up there enjoying the night air. We began discussing the New Testament I had taken along to read.

Down below we could hear the old songs: "Savannah River"; "My Old Kentucky Home"; then it was "Rock of Ages," another hymn, a pause. And so it went: hymns, then testimonies, and finally a message.

When it was over my three friends were euphoric. They had succeeded in "preaching" to virtually all the passengers. Naturally, they called another sing for two nights later. Once again I went to the third deck, but this time there were sixty others up there with me. They weren't about to get caught twice!

As I later reflected on those sixteen days aboard ship, it occurred to me that this situation represented a microcosm of the church in the world. Traditional methods and activities that are meaningful to us are often not effective in reaching the world around us. Subsequent years of adapting to a new culture and language for the sake of the gospel have confirmed that realization.

One benefit of taking the gospel across cultural and linguistic frontiers is that many of my best and most unassailable ideas were destroyed in the process. Few of my methods survived the transition, and those that did probably shouldn't have. Stripped, I discovered my ignorance, which lay buried all along. This was an extremely valuable experience, for awakening to one's ignorance is the dawn of learning.

All of this has set me on a quest that continues to this day—to determine what it really means to take the gospel into the world. Over these years I have considered many questions relating to the mobility of the gospel. Many remain unanswered (including some of those I will list), but I have learned enough to realize that I have sometimes been oblivious to some major biblical truths. Consequently, these have been years of searching. My desire is to enlist you in this search, so that together we may contribute to the progress of the gospel in the world.

Here are some of the questions I've faced:

What about the world we live in? How accurate is our perception of it? Do we understand what is really going on in the minds of those around us? Are we aware of where modern man's philosophy has taken him? Do we know where he is emotionally?

What about secularization? Do we know the extent to which the world

around us has become secularized? How do we communicate with the secularized? Is it even possible?

What is genuine communication? To what degree do we have to consider differences in mentality when we share Christ? How can we know the gospel has been communicated? When we fail to communicate, who is responsible? Just how do we adapt to our hearers?

What did Jesus mean when He said the gospel is to be preached to "every creature" and in "all the world"? At what point have we fulfilled this command? Is it when we have proclaimed the terms of the contract to someone, or is there more to it than that? Are evangelism and "reaping" synonymous?

What did Jesus mean when He told us we are to be "in the world"? How do we reconcile this with "coming out from among them"? What is the balance between involvement with the world and isolation? Are we in the world as Jesus intended, or are we ghetto-ized?

What about the great things that are happening in the church today: the big crusades, the seminars, the super-churches? Given time and adequate manpower, will they not accomplish the commands of Christ? Will our programs and institutions fill the need? If not, what's missing?

Who is responsible for the advance of the gospel in the world? Is it realistic to expect every Christian to be involved? Or are we loading our brothers with false guilt? What about personal evangelism? Is that the answer? Is personal evangelism only for the gifted few? Where does the community of believers fit into the picture?

As I searched for answers, I realized that the Christian mission is far more complex and varied than we are willing to admit. Our limited success in communicating across the frontiers of different mentalities and cultures convinced me that we must be overlooking some major scriptural truths in this matter of communicating the gospel to the world. We are not effectively communicating with the secularized men and women of Western cultures or with the billions of others outside of the normal scope of our proclamation.

Our Western society is becoming less receptive to approaches that were effective in the past. At the same time, we have so simplified our understanding of evangelism and have become so accustomed to our ineffectiveness that we continue busily in our established patterns and are nearly unaware of the unreached world that surrounds us.

Our evangelism is primarily among the strays from our own fold, people who have grown up in our churches. Caring for them, together with attending to the internal needs of our churches, is enough to keep us busy. Consequently, there is little time to pause to reflect on the fact that we are not doing well at reaching out to the unbelieving world around us. In a

sense, we are talking to ourselves and don't even realize it.

Ken Lottis, who was my colleague in Brazil for twenty years, has provided a good illustration of this. In recounting the adventures of one of his furloughs, he told me the following story.

As I drove up to the coffee shop that afternoon, I really didn't know what to expect. I hadn't seen Pastor Ellsworth in over twenty years. Now, after all this time, he had tracked me down with a letter and some phone calls. With his wife, he was driving 165 miles to have a cup of coffee with my wife and me.

When we had first become acquainted, he was newly married, recently ordained, and holding his first pastorate. I, too, was recently married at that time, involved in a Navigator ministry, and attending his church. Now, twenty years later, we were about to meet in a hotel coffee shop. My wife wondered as we walked in the door, "Do you suppose we will even recognize them?" We did, probably because they were something of a mirror image of us: a bit of gray hair, a few extra pounds, and some wrinkles around the eyes.

As we began our discussion, we mostly reminisced and talked about our families. Then the conversation shifted to the ministries we had been involved in during those twenty years. Pastor Ellsworth had held several different pastorates, each a bit larger than the previous one. His current church in a midwestern town was typical middle America—farmers, ranchers, etc.

My twenty years had been spent in a Navigator ministry in Brazil. When I mentioned some of our experiences in communicating the gospel to young Brazilians, he responded by saying, "In every congregation I have been in, I have tried the traditional methods of evangelism: crusades, house-to-house calling, personal evangelism seminars. I picked up *Evangelism as a Lifestyle* because I knew it was about your work with Jim Petersen in Brazil. As I began to read, I suddenly had the feeling that I was finding some explanations for my frustration in my attempts to evangelize the people in our community.

"Our church is a Bible-believing, Bible-preaching church like hundreds of others in the Midwest. The community is small, with a population under ten thousand. Last year I had a week-long series of evangelistic meetings. The evangelist was good and the meetings were well attended, but mostly by people from our own congregation.

"In reading about things you did in Brazil among the secularized, I finally realized that there were many people in my commu-

nity also who were secularized. They were not intellectuals; they were simply people for whom the Church and its message no longer held any interest. They were never going to walk through the doors of my church. I am now asking myself what I have to do to reach them.”

This story illustrates several difficulties we Christians have in communicating with those around us. We are often oblivious of the gap between ourselves and them. Our methods do not lead to genuine communication with those who most need to hear. We can be unaware of this failure, and even when made aware we are at a loss to know what to do about it.

It does not have to be that way. It is possible to communicate the gospel effectively to all kinds of people. But to do so, we must expand our understanding of what the Scriptures teach about evangelism. That is the purpose of this book: to awaken our awareness to the world of people around us and to call our attention to some biblical truths we have been neglecting. We will demonstrate that a complete definition of evangelism as described by Jesus and expanded in the epistles involves two aspects:

1. The *proclamation* of the gospel: an *action* through which the non-Christian receives a clear statement of the essential message.
2. The *affirmation* of the gospel: a *process* of modeling and explaining the Christian message.

We will find that both aspects are essential if we are to reach all kinds of people. But both are also limited. We are more familiar with the first, often treating it as the comprehensive means of evangelism. Proclamation is essential, but is only one phase in the complete process. It may be an initial phase, as when the Apostle Paul entered a city, went to a synagogue, and talked to people. Or it may be a later phase in the context of affirmation. In the past we have focused on proclamation and have almost ignored affirmation.

With a scriptural definition of evangelism, we will find that much more of our society is reachable than we imagine—although these people may not be immediately reachable. It is time to begin actively trusting God that we can liberate more people from slavery to darkness than we are now. It can be done, but it will demand change.

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## PART ONE

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# ANALYSIS OF THE TIMES