

Introduction to Samuel M. Shoemaker,
“*Church Congress Syllabus 47:*
Personal Evangelism”

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Samuel Shoemaker was an authentic Anglican evangelist. In this article, he identifies a besetting sin of the church in every age, namely, our propensity to advocate for evangelism, but never do it. He is especially critical of the priest who fails to be personally involved in evangelism. His article provides an interesting taxonomy, focusing on what he calls “spiritual work with individuals” or “personal work.” Then we have a step-by-step process (an “interview”) described, much of which is wise—be authentic, recognize one’s own imperfections, and speak from a place of love (which involves listening most of the time), make sure you are willing to say the word *sin*, make sure that there is a “Christian decision,” and finally provide strategies for subsequent discipleship.

Naturally there are differences between his time and ours. Our technological, Internet age would probably want some recognition that the interview might come in stages—it might start on social media (as Facebook friends) and then move to a meeting. It is “man” throughout; this is definitely before inclusive language. The theological assumptions are binary: there is no Rahnerian recognition that the Holy Spirit is already at work in the life of the “pagan” (as Shoemaker talks about the interviewed person at one point). The psychological and sociological contexts are ignored. For example, best pastoral practice invites us to recognize that intimate conversations might expose areas of deep complexity that require psychological expertise; a person abused as a child who finds it difficult to forgive the abuser will need to be referred for specialist help. In addition, there is no social

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dimension to this theology; there is no obligation in Shoemaker's principles at the end of his article to recognize that the gospel requires us to serve the poor and fight for justice.

Perhaps the major difference I have with the article is theological. God is going to do the work of redemption; we are but tools. To bring a human life to a point of decision for Christ in one interview, as Shoemaker suggests, puts extraordinary pressure on the priest in the conversation. A better picture is to recognize that the Holy Spirit has already been present and working in that life; our role is to be a constructive player in a larger score that God is composing in the life of the seeker.

Yet for all these differences, Shoemaker is more right than wrong. He is witnessing to a vital component of the Anglican tradition. He wants to bring the healing power of Jesus Christ to the hurting lives of those around him. For that simple goal, Shoemaker is exactly right.

Church Congress Syllabus 47 Personal Evangelism

SAMUEL M. SHOEMAKER*

The Need

It has become respectable to talk about evangelism in the Episcopal Church, but this does not mean that many of us have progressed very far in doing much about it. We are inclined to be more sure about what kinds of evangelism we do not like than we are about what kinds we do like, and our judgments in the matter are more likely to be dictated by taste than by the test of effectiveness. There is something a little ludicrous about a group of clergy gathered somewhere, and passing enthusiastic resolutions about the urgent need for evangelism, many of whom would be quite unable to function in any actual evangelistic capacity. A few of us take a trial at it now and then, but how often do we fall back upon our “incomparable liturgy” as our best appeal to people, forgetful of the fact that the whole organized system of the Church, liturgy, sacraments and all, is only meant to function for those who have contracted to live the Christian life! No one can believe that these means and methods, however important in their own sphere, can be the persuasive and evangelizing force that causes people to want to live the Christian life. Because we do not realize this; and do not learn to draw more people to Christian faith and life and service, we are denying to them the inestimable privileges which our Church has to offer.

The need today is stark. As ancient moorings and securities are swept away, as thousands of people become centered in themselves because they have no God in Whom their faith can center, the poverty of their inner lives and their tendency towards neuroticism increase.

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One minister of our Church spends from nine till two each day talking, he says, with “patients”—his own people, and others who seek him out, practically all of whom are partially sick in body, mind or spirit. Psychiatrists are everywhere busy, but cannot by their “science” alone provide the faith and joy in living which have been given to us in the assurances of the Christian Gospel. These needs constitute our challenge and our supreme opportunity, for they are our doorways into human lives. Such people are open and ready for that combination of informed and intelligent counselling, plus convinced and related Christian evangelism, which makes the most effective dealing with human personality today. These people can be the future of our parish churches if they are handled rightly. The Church will itself greatly benefit by the infusion into it of more persons who come in because of a clearly recognized need, to which need the Gospel and its answer have been fitted by careful spiritual workmen. We suffer in our parishes from lack of new blood, from too much dependence on the same old crowd, from working only with what we have, and with no fresh incentive and no new levels of expectation.

We all will accept the simple statement of the late William Temple that “Our training for the ministry has been too exclusively pastoral in its outlook and insufficiently evangelistic; that is to say, it has aimed at enabling men to foster the spiritual life of those who are within the Church, but has not sufficiently equipped them to make appeal with power to those who are outside.”

Obviously this is not a matter of “churchmanship.” We all suffer from the lack of evangelism, amongst our own church people as well as amongst outsiders. We all are responsible for countless other souls for whom Christ died, some of whom certainly have been put off by our want of spiritual power and our inability to relate our faith to their need, even when they came and presented that need to us. Many so-called “Evangelicals” are evangelical in name and “position” only—they are not actually evangelistic in their lives and in their ministries. Evangelism means action, evangelicalism may mean nothing more than a point of view, which is like nothing so much as the smile without the cat! And many deeply “Catholic” men and women possess far more actual evangelizing zeal and knowledge and technique than do the present-day Evangelicals. The need, the responsibility, the urgency, include us all, and all of us must ask ourselves what we are doing about reaching those who are outside the Church and away from the influence of Christ.

Certain kinds of evangelism do not seem to “go” in this time. The big tent and the loud speaker and the sawdust trail belong to another day. The purely dogmatic theological approach, which does not take time to canvass the actual situation of the individual, is also a thing of the past. Most of us would not dignify by the name of evangelism the mere drumming up of numbers for the roll of church-membership; and this has its Anglican version of bringing them to Confirmation with little or no conversion-content to it. But three kinds of evangelism are open to us, and we must make use of them. The *parish mission*, led by a converted man with God in his heart and a knowledge of human nature, can do much to revivify the life of the parish, and draw into it some who have been strangers to it. The “*cell*” or small, informal spiritual company appears almost to be a characteristic expression of the work of the Holy Spirit in our time; and in it we see, not alone some converted individuals in one place, but (what is much more important), individuals standing in a *converted relation* to each other: converted relations are more impressive today than merely converted individuals. And then there is the one type of evangelism that never was out of date, and never will be, for it was singularly our Lord’s own method: the touch of one life upon another, *spiritual work with individuals*, “personal work,” by whatever name you call it, and in whatever effective way you get it done. It is with this last type that this article is concerned; and we are not so much at pains to describe it as to provoke in the reader a greater desire to do it, and to try to offer him some concrete help concerning the “how.”

The Interviewer

It is a bromide to say that the interviewer must himself be a converted man if he would bring the experience of Christian conversion to one with whom he counsels. However that experience may have come, whatever “sudden” or “gradual” elements it may contain, it must have been for him a decisive and life-transforming experience. Henry B. Wright used to say that no man can “ooze” into a Christian experience. It has been truly said that we can grow in grace, but we cannot grow *into* grace: the latter is a step, an act, a decision. If an interviewer is going to be able to say with Ezekiel, “I sat where they sat,” then he must have sat there—he must have been a person with a conscious problem, must have faced his own responsibilities for having brought about the problem and his own sins as contributing to it,

must have turned to God with penitence and determination to live a new life, and must have laid hold of those “means of grace” which he will soon be commending to his hearer. Perhaps something like this has occurred more than once: but the initial step, the place where one actually begins to lay hold of Christian experience, is what thousands are waiting to know today. We shall again and again be driven back to what has happened to us, and have to say with humility but with assurance, “This one thing I know, that whereas I was blind, now I see.”

But this must be balanced by the constant consciousness that we are not perfection standing on one side of a line, and speaking to imperfection on the other: we are ordinary men, with problems, some of them still on the way to being solved, who stand ever under the same judgment of God as confronts all human beings. Every deep perception of what constitutes the need in another must throw light also upon ourselves: every decision which another makes in our presence must be one which we make with him in God’s Presence. Kierkegaard says, “Christendom has done away with Christianity, without being quite aware of it. The consequence is that, if anything is to be done about it, one must try again to introduce Christianity into Christendom.”¹ Not first into pagans and outsiders and unbelievers, but *first* into us Christians ourselves. The words which we often say in a kind of mock-humility we need to lay much to heart: “we must be converted over and over again.”

We shall be dominated by one or other of two emotions as we proceed to help others spiritually: by the will to love, or by the will to power. We shall feel ourselves superior, on trial, under pressure, perhaps hurried—or we shall feel compassionate, with nothing to “prove,” but only a desire to share our own experience, and faith and a will-to-help. The will-to-power will try to force its own solutions, the will-to-love will evoke them from the other person. The will-to-power will hardly hear what the other says, the will-to-love will be in silent listening much of the time. The will-to-power may reveal principles, but the will-to-love will open up insights in both ourselves and the other. The will-to-power may solve the immediate problem, but the will-to-love may win and transform the person. Everything depends upon whether God’s Spirit can come through a released and loving human spirit, or whether we are so much in the grip of a good determination, or a good ‘method,’ or perhaps the pattern of some past

¹ Søren Kierkegaard, *Training in Christianity*, p. 39.

experience, that we do not allow this experience to be a fresh gift from God to us and the one whom we seek to help.

A good interviewer must know the secret of constant prayer—prayer that keeps letting the present power of God into the situation moment by moment. We ought to be in prayer before we come to an interview, long blocks of prayer if we can manage it, but many brief prayers in any case, so that we are steeped in Christ's Spirit before we presume to come within the sacred confines of another human soul. And as we listen to his story with the front of our minds, we need to be listening to God with the back of them, so that He may pour in His power, love and insight, and make of this a time, not when another human being is conscious that he talks with an expert counsellor, but when he is made aware of the living God, with Whom therefore he can come into touch himself. Unless all this is given to us, and comes through us, we shall work too much by our human powers. "As I hear I speak."

As we listen to God receptively, we must listen to the person we would help creatively. A few provocative questions, something to cut off too much "recall," or to bring the conversation back on the track, yes: but no "speeches," none of those broadsides of our latest intellectual effort in a sermon or book, no parade of learning, and not too detached a silence either, but a resolute setting of ourselves to the need and mood of the other person. If we are at leisure from ourselves, if this is not a "case" but a life in trouble, if we can call out the story, the reactions, the deepest feelings of one whom we would help, he will already have begun helping himself by talking. The thing will clarify as it becomes externalized. We must learn to be at home in the deep places of human souls. Otherwise we shall be merely exchanging ideas, which have little healing in them. God took the abstract Word and it "was made flesh": we so often take the now concrete Gospel, vaporize it into ideas, so that "the flesh is made word." Every word we speak must correspond with an experience—that will keep the word flesh.

How much shall we draw on our own spiritual experience? There are two schools of thought. One says, not at all, for no two people are alike, and the intrusion of your own story will muddy the water—keep detached from it all, and let the counsellee ring his problems and thoughts against your mind almost as if it were neutral. Sometimes this is essential, especially where some measure of true authority on your part may help to build up confidence. The other school

of thought says, yes, use your own experience where it will help to make him know you understand him, and may point a possible way out—though not *necessarily* the way out for him—and to create faith. We are not simply counsellors of human wisdom, we are Christians committed to our Lord, who believe that in Him alone is found the solution to human problems and the fullness of life for which all are seeking. In this, witness must surely be free to have a place.

Is not such dealing with individuals too specialized for any but clergy to do it? It may be well for laymen to keep in touch with clergy about it, especially when they come into contact with complicated situations or those involving real mental sickness. That is, provided the clergyman himself has some knowledge of these things, as many have not. But in its more ordinary forms, this kind of evangelism is peculiarly adapted to laymen. They can often reach other laymen better than clergy can. We have too much restricted laymen to the routine, mechanical and financial side of the Church's work. William Temple said, "The main duty of the clergy must be to train the lay members of the congregation in their work of witness." It needs to be said, however, that no clergyman will do a very convincing job of training his laymen to do evangelistic work if this means he is trying to palm off on them work which he does not know how to do himself, and will not trouble to learn. If he will do this with his laymen, then they will catch it from him.

The Interview

We shall talk with two kinds of people. One has taken the initiative and openly asked for help, while with the other we have taken the initiative and are seeking to bring to him Christian faith and experience. We must learn how to get on board with each of these people. Dr. Fosdick says a man is like an island, and sometimes you have to row all around him before you find a place to land. Even one who has come on his own may have fear and misgivings in his mind about what we shall do: he will be drawn along as we create an atmosphere of friendly, informal, non-professional welcome and interest. We may break the ice by some such disarming remark as, "I don't know whether I can help you with what is on your mind, but I should like to try, if you feel you can tell me what it is." In the case of one whom we seek out, we need to proceed more indirectly. A good way is to find some situation which he is interested in bettering, tell him a story

about how much a situation has yielded to a Christian approach (this means we must be fortified with many such stories with modern connotation and relevance), bring it back to its inevitable source both of trouble and of cure, namely human relations and human character. Then the field is open to suggest that he might find the remedy and bring it into the situation. If we are in touch with men and with life, it will do more to win confidence than anything else.

Once rapport has been established, he will feel free to talk about what is most on his mind. He may not come to the point at once: much depends on our creative listening. We must have time to hear him out, not stopping to point out where this or that was a wrong turning or interpretation. We want him to clear his mind. The emphasis is on him now, on what he is thinking about—not on us and the answers we may later help him to find.

Most people do not understand themselves well, nor the laws that govern life. The difficult situations which bring them to us seem to them unjust, thrust on them by others, and next to impossible to solve. There must come into our talk some reference to the moral fixtures and spiritual assurances of Christian faith, not dogmatically expressed, but rather assumed, as offering a clue to the answer. Every untoward situation arises from the ignorance or disobedience of these laws: and the solution lies in a return to them. We will often remind people that there are two factors in every situation: (1) what happens, over which we may have little control, and (2) how we take what happens, over which we have almost entire control. To see where they have been partly or wholly responsible for the situation in which they find themselves is to ask them to grow up, to admit some guilt in what has happened, and to face the future in a new way. We must take them past evasion and self-pity and on to the assumption of mature responsibility. We must not, however, make decisions for them or ask them to accept our interpretations, except as these jibe with their own deepest insights.

But here comes the crux of the matter—and a parting of the ways for humanistic counselling and Christian evangelism. For humanists believe the answers to our problems lie in ourselves, and Christians believe they lie in Christ. Christians believe in sin, and it is easy to help a person to see where sin is just the difference between what Christ would have a man do, and the mistakes and follies he commits when on his own. We ought to know how to say the word “sin” in an interview, not as if a cloud had come over our faces, but as if a

light had shined in our minds—for “sin” means we are responsible, and therefore there is an answer to the solution which we can find with God’s help. Someone truly said that “we take hold of God by the handle of our sins.” Our responsibility for one wrong situation should lead us to consider a life with wrong foundations, and thence to a thorough examination of ourselves in the light, say, of the Commandments or the Beatitudes. It will often help if we will get the person to make an honest, itemized list of his own faults and sins. And this, when he comes to Christian decision, will fill it with moral and spiritual content. Keep in mind the three main drives in most people’s lives: money, sex and power. Deal with them so that you do a thorough job, and do not merely deal in isolation with the particular problem that has been presented. Most people never make a significant Christian decision because they have not been helped to prepare for it adequately.

What is a “Christian decision”? Clearly the most important element in it is what Christ does for us—His initiative, His forgiveness, His regeneration. But we have our part, too. It consists in our entire surrender of ourselves to all we know of God and His will as revealed in Christ. It may at the first have little conscious theological content, but this will grow as we grow in grace. People need to be shown what this decision means: the rooting out from life of whatever is contrary to God’s will, the planting into it of spiritual habits, and a new kind of God-centered human relations. Often we should lead them right into decision as we talk with them. Suggest you get on your knees and both pray aloud. “Pray out loud? Never did such a thing in my life!” “All right—this is a good time to begin—forget me—think about God and your own needs and tell Him about them.” Suggest he puts his sins and decision into clear words in prayer. Keep all this natural and human, while great reverence is in your heart. One delightful pagan was praying aloud in a rather ambitiously long first prayer, and in the midst of it turned side-wise to me and said “How’m I doin’?” I told him, “Very well, keep on till you’re through.”

Then we are in position to ask him to begin to live out what he has undertaken and to make use of those Christian “means of grace” which sustain and develop it. Some of them will be:

- (1) Restitution to any whom he has wronged, apology to family, business associates, neighbours—those who have been hurt

- by any wrongs in the past. This offers a great opportunity, also, to initiate a witness for Christ, for they will usually be surprised at such costly honesty.
- (2) Regular habits of daily devotion. Both the Bible and the Prayer Book will become new mines of spiritual help and direction, as people become committed to the life which they describe and foster. Other books can be suggested to them. The Prayer Book has been called “the language of converted people.”
 - (3) Membership in some Christian Communion. I think we need to beware of too swift a discussion of denominational issues—I saw a missionary bishop once lose a man to another church because, while the man had just been converted to Christ and was burning with enthusiasm about Him, the good bishop got into a criticism of other churches than his own. The man was bewildered and disgusted—and joined another church. We had better strengthen whatever church-loyalty exists—if any!
 - (4) Spiritual fellowship. Every live Christian needs some more informal, spontaneous companionship with other Christians than is offered by the services of the Church. Every parish ought to have a “cell” where men may help one another, where women may help one another, and where the pooling of Christian experience brings encouragement and needed corrective and growth.
 - (5) Life-investment on the basis of God’s will. Young people especially will need to consider both their life-work, and their marriage, as no longer merely private affairs, but as being part of the plan and will of God for them, needing therefore to be made part of their surrender to Him.
 - (6) Reaching other individuals. One who is on fire with Christian faith will long to make it real to others. He may be shy about it at first, and need technique and help: but we must urge him to do it, stay by him as he tries to do it. We need many individuals, clergy and laymen, who can be used to bring Christ to others.
 - (7) Application of Christian principles in daily work. One individual can hardly swing a company policy at once: but he can draw about him a “cell” of men who are concerned about the welfare of the company, and its responsibilities; talk with

them about their relations to one another, and the whole labor-management situation; bring them up to a new level of thinking and planning; and slowly infiltrate the company with Christian life and action. This is being done in many instances. And no man is truly converted whose daily life and work do not show the difference.

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Questions for Discussion

I. *The Need*

1. Why is the Episcopal Church so weak in Evangelism?
2. With the shocking decline in our Church in Sunday School attendance, do we not need to find a practical means of

Evangelism immediately? (cf. account of National Council meeting figures in *The Living Church*, May 4, 1947; Vol. CXIV, No. 18, p. 3).

3. What means are open to us all?
4. Is example enough?

II. *The Interviewer*

1. What qualities are needed in an effective worker?
2. Can laymen disregard this work or “leave it to the clergy”?
3. Have you ever brought anyone to Christian decision and experience?

III. *The Interview*

1. With what kind of experiences should the interviewer’s mind be stocked?
2. Can we reconcile “counselling” and “evangelism”?
3. What further needs to happen to us before we begin to do this work?

