

# Beating Isolation

Andrew Young

Principal, Grace Theological College

\* \* \* \* \*

Isolation kills evangelism. If Christians aren't having close contact with unbelievers there's little likelihood that people will be brought to know Christ. Close personal contact is the first requirement for evangelism.<sup>1</sup> "The yeast cannot do its leavening work unless it is inserted in the dough. The salt cannot stop decay unless it is rubbed into the meat. No lamp gives light to the house if it is hidden away under a bed."<sup>2</sup>

The church must go into the world if it is to win the world. Shouting the message from rooftops remote from the lost and needy won't do the job. Christians have to infiltrate the world, identifying themselves with it so that they can win it.<sup>3</sup>

## A Withdrawn Community

John Stott contends that the church has become a withdrawn community. "We have disengaged too much," he says. "We have become a withdrawn community. We have been aloof instead of alongside."<sup>4</sup>

The charge can't easily be denied. Most Christians have few non-Christian friends. Fewer still spend quality time with non-Christians with a view to sharing the gospel with them. It's a known fact that within just two years of becoming a Christian, most new converts lose all significant relationships with their former friends.<sup>5</sup> Former bosom-friends get down-graded to causal acquaintances.<sup>6</sup>

It's not hard to see how this happens. There's a host of things that conspire to stop Christians having close, personal contact with non-Christians. Here are just a few:

- *Fear* – Christians often fear non-Christians and vice versa. They fear rejection and contamination. They don't know how to form redemptive relationships (genuine relationships aimed at leading non-Christians to saving faith) and are afraid to try to do so. They typically also fear the disapproval of Christian peers.<sup>7</sup> Non-Christians, on the other hand, fear non-acceptance and condemnation. Exposure to a Christian lifestyle rubs their conscience raw and reminds them of coming judgment. They naturally shrink from close contact.
- *Moral and cultural chasm* – Christians and non-Christians are separated by an ever-growing moral and behavioral chasm. They don't speak the same language, have the same values, like the same music, raise their families the same way, and so on. Christians form a distinct sub-culture within any society. They don't have to go overseas to take part in cross-cultural evangelism! They have to cross a cultural gap whenever they try to reach their neighbours.
- *Excessive church demands* – Many Christians are so tied up with church meetings and activities that they have no time to meet non-Christians let alone spend time with them building close relationships.
- *Busyness* – Again, most Christians are intensely busy people. Because they take home, church and work commitments seriously, they more than most, find themselves caught up in a

---

<sup>1</sup> Stott, *Our Guilty Silence*, p. 65

<sup>2</sup> loc. cit.

<sup>3</sup> loc. cit.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p. 66

<sup>5</sup> Petersen, *Living Proof* p. 54

<sup>6</sup> loc. cit.

<sup>7</sup> Crossley, *Everyday Evangelism*, p. 95. Crossley writes, "A big problem facing Christians as they seek to be friendly towards sinners is not the unbelievers outside the church, but professing Christians inside the church. Whenever Christians try to follow Christ in reaching out to the needy and lost, they will run the risk of offending a considerable number of folk within the churches. Pharisees are still with us!"

whirlwind of activity. When they do stop they are too exhausted to think of anything but getting away from it all – especially from people they don't mix easily with.<sup>8</sup>

- *Self-preoccupation* – Many Christians are intensely self-absorbed. Their personal and spiritual sensitivity means they are always thinking about themselves – often with the best intentions – and correspondingly are unable to give themselves to other people. They fail to see opportunities to relate to non-Christians, and find it almost impossible to relate when they do.
- *Bad models* – Often the only concept of evangelism Christians have is that of “ambush evangelism,”<sup>9</sup> a kind of spiritual mugging that barges into the lives of others without regard for them as people. Their natural respect for others makes them cringe at being party to such invasions
- *Wrong attitudes* – many Christians struggle to accept the behaviour of unbelievers. They stand aloof from them, condemning them much in the manner of the Pharisees of old. They see them as “the enemy” rather than dupes in the grip of Satan.<sup>10</sup>

The consequences are drastic. At a personal level, Christians get so out of touch and uncomfortable with non-Christians that they lose all ability to communicate with them. They don't know how to relax with them or to explore their interests and needs. A great wall of silence rears itself between them, and the Christian opts out of even trying to be involved in evangelism.

At the corporate (church) level, the consequences are just as severe. Jim Petersen writes, “.... isolation has a destructive effect on a local body of Christians.... Christians who keep to themselves, who do not experience a continuing influx of people arriving from the dominion of darkness, soon isolate themselves within their own subculture. Receiving no feedback from people fresh from the world, they forget what its like to be out there. Peculiar language codes, behavioral patterns, and communication techniques emerge that have meaning only for insiders. As such, a local body becomes increasingly ingrown. It becomes stranger and stranger to outsiders. Eventually, communication with the man on the street becomes impossible.”<sup>11</sup>

## Overcoming the Problem

Here are some practical suggestions to help overcome this problem of isolation:

**#1: Get your thinking straight.** Sound thinking is always the first step to sound action. Just “doing something” is not the answer to the isolation problem. We've got to make sure that our thinking is straight on a number of issues before we can hope to see radical and lasting change. We've got to be clear on these things in particular:

- *It's our duty to go to the world, not wait for the world to come to us.* Frank Tillapaugh was right when he said to pastors, “Forget about bringing people in [to the church]. Focus on getting God's people out where there is sin and pain and need.”<sup>12</sup> Jesus himself is the supreme example of what it means to “go” into the world. He lived in close contact with those he came to seek and save.<sup>13</sup>
- *Aggressive evangelism doesn't mean you have to become a spiritual-assault merchant.* “Barging into the privacy of other people's lives shouting ‘Are you saved?’ is not personal evangelism ... This form of ‘attack’ fails to respect the dignity and respect of all human

---

<sup>8</sup> Aldrich, *Lifestyle Evangelism*, p. 17 “Caught up in the whirlwind of activity, schedules, and events, we find that healthy, supportive, ‘people-time’ is an increasingly rare commodity. Adding evangelism to an already hectic schedule would certainly be the straw that would break the camel's back”

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p. 19

<sup>10</sup> Aldrich, p. 20

<sup>11</sup> Petersen, p. 56

<sup>12</sup> Crossley, p. 78

<sup>13</sup> Stott, pp. 65-66. “Of the Son's identification with the world into which he was sent, there can be no shadow of doubt. He did not remain in heaven; he came into the world... He gave men a chance to behold His glory. Nor did he only let them gaze from a distance. He scandalized the church leaders of His day by mixing with the riff raff they avoided... Therefore, when He says to us ‘go’, this is what He means... we are to go as he went to penetrate human society, to mix with unbelievers and fraternize with sinners”

beings.... The Christian who behaves in this brash and insensitive manner salves his own conscience in supposedly fulfilling the commission to evangelize. Yet at the same time, he probably hinders the cause of the gospel and makes true evangelization of his ‘victims,’ at some future date, virtually impossible.”<sup>14</sup>

- *Intimate contact with the world doesn’t mean you have to compromise with the world.* Contact means relating closely and personally with others. We compromise when we surrender our convictions, keep quiet about them, or act against them. Contact with the unconverted is going to bring us into close quarters with much that repulses us, but it doesn’t mean that we are going to have to corrupt ourselves to be with them. We get close to them to win them, not to imitate them. Contact has to be on our terms, not theirs.<sup>15</sup>
- *You don’t condone what unbelievers do just because you don’t condemn them.* When we accept and love people where we find them it doesn’t mean we approve of their ungodly conduct. It’s simply recognizing we don’t have to act as their judges. The Lord will judge. He wants us to reach blind and sick sinners with his truth and love and seek to be the channels through which he heals them. We need to realize that their outward actions are only symptoms of a deeper and uglier inner problem – rebellion against God and enslavement to sin and Satan. Jesus didn’t spend time treating symptoms. He went for the cure.<sup>16</sup> It shouldn’t surprise us people who are not Christians act the way they do. Without Christ they can’t but be the way they are.
- *Christianity is firstly about Christ, not the church or religion.* Much of what the world sees when it looks at us is religion (our particular way of expressing our Christianity in its forms, its activities etc.), and it doesn’t appeal to them. People think that if they become Christians they have to become like us. We have to make sure we convey to them that Christianity is about Christ. Much of our Christian practice has historical, personal and cultural overtones. It doesn’t always reveal Christ as clearly as it should. In fact, it can sometimes obscure him and be an obstacle to people seriously considering the gospel.<sup>17</sup>

**# 2: Face your fears squarely.** Pretending we don’t have a problem with fear when we do won’t help us. It’s wrong to be fearful and to let fear cripple us. But it’s equally wrong to deny it exists when it

---

<sup>14</sup> Crossley, pp. 9-10

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, pp. 97-99. “*When believers are motivated by a desire for the approval and appreciation of unconverted people and seek to live just as they live, they show they are in love with the world... The godly man does not turn to the worldly and unconverted for advice, nor does he mix with them in order to identify with them in their behaviour, nor yet join in with their bad conversations (Ps. 1:1). Friendship with the world is always on our terms, not theirs.*” See also Stott, p. 70. “... *indispensable as penetration is as a prelude to witness, it is no use the church identifying with the world if in doing so it ceases to be the church. In a word, identification is not to be identified with assimilation. If salt loses its saltiness, it is useless.... We are to manifest ‘holy worldliness’... because we are called to be ‘in the world’ (worldly) and not ‘of the world’ (holy) at the same time. We are called to live in natural surroundings a supernatural life, to demonstrate in this age the life of the age to come*” Petersen, p. 57, writes, “*Fundamentally, sanctification is not a matter of geography (where we are), but of the heart (who owns it). A safe distance is maintained as we are constantly transformed by the renewing of our minds through the truth of God’s word. This requires time alone with Him, when we are actively submitting our minds to the truth. If this practice is not part of our lives, or if it is not effective, we are ill-prepared for encounters with non-Christians in the world. In such a case, perhaps isolation would be best after all*”

<sup>16</sup> Petersen, pp. 58-59. “*This ability to see beyond surface symptoms to the true need is the key to establishing honest relationships with non-Christians. We do not have to condone their behavior to accept and love them.... We need to accept the non-Christian as he is, go for the cure, and then help him pick his way through things that are destroying him. Whenever we get this sequence turned around we become reformers rather than offerers of true healing.*”

<sup>17</sup> Stott, pp. 70-71. *More often than we know, what people reject is not the true Christ but the Christ they see in Christians – not Christ at all, in fact, but a rather unChristlike church. Institutionalism, reactionary stuffiness, archaic liturgy, the establishment, absorption in the petty and the superficial– these are some of the features of modern religion, against which people revolt. ‘If we Christians could put on Christ and put off “religion,” we would be in a far better position for the evangelization of the outsider.’”* See also Petersen, “*Our message is that of a Person, and we are not free to present him with encumbrances... we are called to impose no human standards or honour no traditions. We are called to proclaim Jesus, no strings attached*” p. 50. “*Christianity and Jesus are not the same. People may have Him without embracing the systems that have been built up around Him. Or they can be involved in the system without knowing anything about him*” p. 52

does. We have to be honest with ourselves. It shouldn't surprise us that we are assailed by fear when it comes to sharing our faith. Satan's very active in resisting evangelism, and it's only to be expected that he will try to paralyze us with timidity. Fear itself is not necessarily sinful, but yielding to it is. Here are some ways we can overcome it:

- *Reject the lies that feed fear.* Fear thrives on half-truths or plain untruths. Thoughts such as, "I can't do this kind of thing," "They won't be interested in spiritual things," "If I tell them this, they will never speak to me again," or "What will people think of me if I do this?" tyrannize and cripple us. We have to reject them for what they are – the lies and accusations of doubt and unbelief. We need to overcome them with Christ's promises and get on and do what he commands us to do.
- *Isolate the cause of your fear and do something about it.* Fear won't go away by itself. Quite the opposite, it grows rather than fades if we don't do something about it. Get to the root of what you are fearful about; confess the sin that lies behind your anxiety; identify what the godly thing to do is; and then, looking to Jesus for strength, do something about it. Timothy wasn't allowed to wallow a captive to his natural timidity. He had to "fan into flame the gift of God" that was in him, knowing that God was not the author of fear but of "power, of love, and of self-discipline."<sup>18</sup>
- *Share your fears with another Christian.* Evangelism is not a lone enterprise. It wasn't without reason that Jesus sent his disciples out in pairs.<sup>19</sup> He almost certainly recognized the need they had for mutual support – even as he himself sought the support and companionship of his closest disciples in the hour of his direst need.<sup>20</sup> Sharing your fears and praying about them with a close friend is one way of overcoming the enemy. Spiritual loners are doubly prone to the paralysis of fear.

**# 3: Start right where you are.** Isolation is rampant because Christians think they have to do something unnatural to overcome it. They think they have to go witnessing on street corners or visit house-to-house talking to people about the gospel. Valid as these approaches to evangelism may be, they are not the only ways of initiating contact with people, nor are they the most natural or the best.<sup>21</sup> Becoming an active evangelist begins by recognizing that God has already placed you in relationships that you, better than anyone else, can use as opportunities to spread the gospel. He has put unconverted neighbours, workmates, family members, social and occasional contacts in your path.<sup>22</sup> We need to recognize these people as our primary and most natural sphere of evangelism. If we believe God controls all things we must believe that he controls all our relationships. Each of us in effect has our own mission field. To begin to break down the walls of isolation, take time to:

- *Identify your natural mission field.* Make a list of the neighbours, unsaved family members, social contacts, workmates, occasional contacts etc. you know to be non-Christians.
- *Reflect on how you can cross the gulf that tends to isolate you from them.* Think of your natural points of contact with these people, their interests and needs, and how you can take steps to have closer links with them.
- *Commit yourself to taking definite steps to make closer contact.* Just thinking won't do it all!! You have to act as well. Perhaps you need to join a sporting club, invite a neighbour for morning tea, or offer to take part in a community project. The best of ideas will wither if they are not acted upon.

---

<sup>18</sup> 2 Tim. 1:6,7

<sup>19</sup> Luke 10:1

<sup>20</sup> Matt. 26:37,38

<sup>21</sup> Crossley, p. 77. "Going out to make contact with the unconverted is often viewed within very narrow confines. 'Outreach' is generally composed of such activities as open-air preaching, door-to-door visitation and the distribution of tracts, leaflets and invitation cards. Many Christians react in fear and trepidation when expected to participate in such things, and needless guilt is caused. To define evangelism in these terms stifles and frustrates many of God's people by forcing them into a 'straitjacket' unsuited to them."

<sup>22</sup> Stott, p. 67. "Most Christians touch the world at three points at least– at work (if they are not employees of an exclusively Christian establishment), at home among neighbours, and in sparetime activities involving membership of sporting teams, social clubs, political activities and community service. We should welcome the contact with non-Christian people which all such opportunities bring"

**# 4: Be an initiator – don't wait for things to happen.** Overcoming isolation starts by you taking the first step, not waiting for someone else to take it! We have to become initiators. Waiting for God “to provide opportunities” or to “open doors” can be wrong. True, God must open doors if our evangelism is to be effective.<sup>23</sup> But that doesn't mean we have to sit still and do nothing until he provides a clear opportunity for us to do or say something. He has given us our standing orders. We are to live active, loving, caring lives of service among our neighbours, friends, workmates and families. As we do so, doors will open and opportunities will arise. We need to be sensitive to this. We mustn't be discouraged when we can't get anywhere in a relationship - God, after all, is the great evangelist and we are simply his co-workers seeking to be faithful in the everyday circumstances in which he has placed us. On the other hand, we need to be ready and alert when a door for friendship does seem to open. God is in control of these things. If we are to overcome isolation we have to

- *Overcome passivity* – the practice of waiting for something outside us to move us to action. The first step to overcoming passivity is to begin to pray. Then, look at the opportunities and responsibilities that already lie before you and get busy. Don't wait to be asked to do things. Commit your way to the Lord, seek his overruling presence and help, and get on and do what lies before you to do!
- *Abandon self-absorption and self-consciousness.* We've got to stop thinking about ourselves and take genuine interest in others. Many of us live such introverted lives among other people that we never make any genuine contact with them.<sup>24</sup> We've got to see self-absorption for the sin that it is and seek, with the Lord's grace, to become God-centred and others-centred people.
- *Learn to take the first step.* Don't wait for people to make introductions or suggest get-togethers. As difficult as you might find it, take the first step yourself. If you don't, likely as not nothing at all will happen.

**# 5: Take a genuine, practical interest in other people.** Someone has said that evangelism is 90% love.<sup>25</sup> It's not about gaining trophies or getting people into our church. That can be manipulative and self-seeking. Nor is it about barreling people about their spiritual condition - this can be brutally insensitive and self-motivated. Evangelism is about genuine care for other people. And it begins as we start to love, to serve, and to offer them sacrificial friendship.<sup>26</sup> Isolation will become a thing of the past if you:

- *Take notice of people.* We're back to that self-absorption problem again. Many of us are so occupied with our own immediate interests and concerns that we don't notice the people around us. We may see them, but through our own eyes – not for who they are or for the particular needs they might have. Calvin was right when he said we can't begin to love others until we do violence to our self-love.<sup>27</sup>
- *Take a genuine interest in them as people.* Forget yourself and think of them! That's what we need to do to get beyond mere acquaintance with people. It's not a matter of being pushy and invasive. It's being genuinely interested in others. It's discovering who people are, and what they are like. We don't have to be in a rush to do this - God will have his time if he wants to call someone to faith and eternal life. But we do have to be others-orientated.
- *Give yourself in sacrificial service to them.* Love is about laying down our lives for others.<sup>28</sup> It's not sentiment or empty words. It's being ready to put yourself out for someone else, taking a towel to wash their feet, or sharing what you have to meet their need. Such love is costly, but that's the way God's love is.

**# 6: Be adaptable.** If we are genuinely interested in other people and intent on serving them for Christ's sake, that means we'll meet them on their turf rather than on our own. We go to them and start where they are at, not where we would like them to be. We are the ones who have to be ready to

---

<sup>23</sup> Col. 4:3

<sup>24</sup> Crossley, p. 78

<sup>25</sup> Petersen, p. 96. “... ninety percent of evangelism is love.... I have to admit I never saw much enduring fruit in evangelism until I began to understand the importance of this truth and began to put it into practice.”

<sup>26</sup> Stott, p. 67

<sup>27</sup> Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Christian Life*, p. 61

<sup>28</sup> 1 Jn. 3:16ff.

adjust.<sup>29</sup> But to do that, we will have to break out of familiar routines, try new things, and even put up with things that we dislike. In other words, we will have to become adaptable – ready to fit in with other people’s interests rather than our own. That’s hard for some of us, but necessary if we are to break out of our comfortable cocoons.<sup>30</sup> We may also cop some flack for it from others, but we have to be ready to bear that. We are bound to be misunderstood at times, and even make blunders we regret. But radical identification with the world calls for nothing less than adaptability within the restrictions imposed by Christ. To avoid being isolated, we must:

- *Meet people where they are at.* Don’t expect people to come and join you in doing what you like, or act in the way you act. Meet them where you find them. Meet them in their domain, don’t expect them to come into yours.
- *Be prepared to adjust to them where possible and permissible.* Expect things you are not used to, and be ready to change where you must. Never break the law of Christ, but be ready to leave behind your own snug lifestyle for his sake.
- *Be ready for misunderstanding.* Expect people to confuse adaptation with compromise.<sup>31</sup> And be prepared for criticism if you stumble. Christians love to shoot their wounded soldiers.<sup>32</sup>

**# 7: Be committed.** Overcoming isolation isn’t easy. It won’t happen without effort and commitment. You’ve got to take definite steps to resist the forces that produce isolation – busyness, introversion, fear, excessive church commitments, the instinct to edify. It’s much safer to stay within the “rabbit burrow,”<sup>33</sup> and that’s where we will end up if we don’t do something definite about it. If we are to overcome isolation, we must

- *Make a decision to do so.* We’ve got to act out of conviction – the belief that Christ requires us to have loving contact with the world in order to win the world – or we won’t act at all. We’ve got to see this as a matter of obedience, not choice or preference. When we reach that point, there has to be a deliberate decision to obey the Lord. Without definite decision, we will drift along in our well-worn rut, comfortable perhaps, but detached and disengaged.
- *Put time and effort into building relationships.* To overcome isolation we are going to have to reclaim time. We are going to have to rethink priorities perhaps, and make radical adjustments to lifestyle. Gareth Crossley is right when he says, “Most Christians are incredibly busy people. For this reason it may be appropriate to ask whether a radical adjustment of commitments is necessary.”<sup>34</sup> We are also going to have to be creative. It will take some thinking “outside the square” if we want to build deep relationships and be free, joy-filled Christians as we do.

---

<sup>29</sup> 1 Cor. 9:20-23. “The witness adjusts to those he seeks to win, not vice versa. Paul defended his freedom to be all things to all men because he knew that freedom was necessary to the correct balance between being ‘in the world’ and being ‘separate from it.’ To be in the world one has to be free to participate in the lives of those around him. Being separate means we do this without compromising the sovereign rule of God in our heart—without sinning in other words.” Petersen, p. 118

<sup>30</sup> Crossley, p. 108. “All that we can hope to do is to live the life of a Christian, clearly and blatantly before the world, to be flexible, approachable, friendly, adaptable, immovable where the law of Christ is concerned or when the honour of the gospel is endangered, but on all other matters, to show remarkable amiability”

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, p. 95. “A big problem facing Christians as they seek to be friendly towards sinners is not the unbelievers outside the church, but professing Christians inside the church. Whenever Christians follow Christ in seeking to reach out to the needy and lost, they will run the risk of offending a considerable number of folk within churches.”

<sup>32</sup> Aldrich, p. 51. “Why is it that we are the only army that shoots its wounded soldiers, as though to get wounded in battle was a sin? The sin is that so few are even in the battle. The few who make it to the front lines through the barrage of criticisms of their Christian comrades and get wounded are often soundly scolded for going to the front lines in the first place. Clearly, the safest thing is to do nothing”

<sup>33</sup> Stott, p. 66 “Major W. Batt satirizes much of our evangelical practice as ‘rabbit-hole Christianity’. He pictures a prim little Christian popping up from his Christian home each morning, like a rabbit out of its hole, making a brave little dash through the perilous outside world, and disappearing for safety into another burrow called ‘my Christian office’ for the rest of the day. Then, when work finishes, he summons up courage to emerge again, looking this way and that, only to bolt down a third hole called my Christian club.”

<sup>34</sup> Crossley, p. 112

- *Keep at it when the going gets tough.* Don't expect the transformation to be instant. You will have to fight against deep-seated habits and tendencies in yourself and you won't find it easy to win the battle (that's where it's so helpful to be accountable to another Christian as you try to do this). You will meet dead-ends time and again – situation where you try to build relationships but they don't go anywhere. Expect to be hurt, betrayed and misunderstood. That's all part what it means to be like Christ today. That's also how he keeps you close to himself and keeps you from becoming too big-headed when he blesses you with success.

---oOo---