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Evangelism, Social Media, and the Mum Effect

David R. Dunaetz

As cultures evolve due to advances in technology, missionaries and other Christian leaders need to develop the most effective strategies for sharing the gospel with those who have not put their faith in Christ and discipling those who have. Various psychological phenomena come into play as technology, especially social media, evolves and influences not only cultures of the global north, but those of the global south as well.

One such phenomenon is the 'mum effect',[1] or the reluctance that people feel to share bad news with others. People tend to remain quiet or 'mum' about information that may be perceived negatively by others. For examples, doctors find it very difficult to inform patients that they have a terminal disease.[2] Rather than communicate the truth concerning the patient's condition, they often find it easier to conceal the information, avoiding the awkwardness that would accompany a full disclosure. Similarly, Christians may find it difficult to share the gospel with unbelievers, anticipating the awkwardness that might accompany such a discussion.[3]

I. The Mum Effect

Originally studied in the 1970s, in the light of advances in medicine that made the diagnosis of various terminal illnesses more common, the mum

1 Jayson L. Dibble, 'It's More Than Self-Presentation: Mum Effects Can Reflect Private Discomfort and Concern for the Recipient', *Communication Research Reports* (2017): 1–9; Abraham Tesser and Sidney Rosen, 'The Reluctance To Transmit Bad News', in *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, vol. 8 (San Diego, CA: Elsevier, 1975), 193–232.

2 L. J. Fallowfield, V. A. Jenkins, and H. A. Beveridge, 'Truth May Hurt but Deceit Hurts More: Communication in Palliative Care', *Palliative Medicine* 16, no. 4 (2002): 297–303.

3 Many other psychological phenomena (which are beyond the scope of this paper) come into play when sharing the gospel with others. For example, *confirmation bias* is the tendency to interpret all new information in a way that confirms one's pre-existing beliefs. If a Christian feels rejected after sharing the gospel in a socially or culturally inappropriate manner, he or she may interpret this rejection as confirmation of the gospel's truth rather than as evidence of the need to communicate the gospel more appropriately.

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effect can be defined generally as a reluctance to share bad news. However, this reluctance is not universal. Media sources provide endless accounts of bad news, and stories about people's destructive behaviours are readily shared privately in social networks. More precisely, the mum effect is a 'reluctance to transmit bad news … to the person for whom the news is bad'.[4]

In the original experiment that demonstrated the mum effect,[5] participants were assigned to one of two conditions. Each subject was placed in a waiting room and then asked to inform another person who appeared to be waiting (and who had stepped out of the room) that he or she should call home because there was some good news (in the first condition) or bad news (in the second condition). The participants in the bad-news condition informed the person of the valence of the news (whether it was good or bad) far less often (26 percent of the time) than those in the good-news condition (82 percent). The results indicated that when people need to transmit bad news to others, they share only the part that is least likely to be upsetting.

Since the gospel (*euangelion*) literally means good news, can the mum effect really help to explain why Christians are hesitant to share the gospel with others? It can, because the gospel is perceived differently by those who do not believe it. 'The word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God' (1 Cor 1:18, NASB). The gospel is good news only to those who believe; for others, it is bad news. 'We are a fragrance of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing; to the one an aroma from death to death, to the other an aroma from life to life' (2 Cor. 2:15–16a, NASB).

Most Christians who have tried to share the gospel with others, especially with those who are unreceptive, know that it can be very awkward, even painful, to explain mankind's need for salvation and God's provision through Jesus Christ to those who refuse to believe. The 'offense of the cross' (Gal. 5:11) is real. Our status as sinners before God, as well as our own inability to do anything about it in ourselves, is bad news for those who have not submitted to the gospel.

Certainly, the Christian will try to present the gospel to a non-believer in a positive light, emphasizing the benefits of following Christ that the non-believer will most likely appreciate or desire. Similarly, a wise presentation of the gospel will avoid unnecessary stumbling blocks or vocabulary that hinders rather than promotes accurate communication. But, as Paul noted, this good news will ultimately be interpreted as bad news by those who reject it, regardless of how the Christian presents it.

II. The Psychological Basis

There are several common reasons why humans do not like to share bad news. The psychological underpinnings of the mum effect can be classified into two main categories: con-

4 Tesser and Rosen, 'The Reluctance To Transmit', 195.

5 Sidney Rosen and Abraham Tesser, 'On Reluctance to Communicate Undesirable Information: The Mum Effect', *Sociometry* (1970): 253–63.

cern for the other party (the recipient of the bad news) and concern for oneself.[6]

1. Concern for the Recipient

In mum effect experiments, when participants were asked why they were unwilling to transmit bad news to someone to whom the bad news was important, concern for the recipients' feelings was the most common reason given.[7] The person who delivers the bad news indirectly causes the recipient to experience malaise or even emotional pain. According to self-determination theory,[8] almost all humans are motivated to improve (or at least maintain) the quality of their relationships with those around them. Therefore, humans generally do not want to hurt other individuals who do not pose a threat to them. By choosing not to transmit bad news, a person avoids (at least temporarily) causing pain to another and thus maintains the relationship.

This concern for others' feelings is amplified if the recipient of the bad news is known to have especially strong negative reactions to unpleasant information.[9] Moreover, people tend to believe that recipients do not want to hear bad news, even if they believe that they themselves would want to hear it. In accord with this pattern, many Christians may tell themselves that non-Christians do not want to hear the gospel, although they would willingly admit that they themselves were glad to hear it.

The early studies of the mum effect also found that if people knew that the recipients wanted to hear the bad news, they were far more willing to share the news with them. Given this phenomenon, useful strategies that Christians can use to share at least parts of the gospel include telling personal stories (which most people enjoy hearing) and simply sharing a Christian perspective on some topic that is already a subject of an enjoyable conversation. I will discuss these strategies in greater depth later.

2. Concern for One's Own Interests

Although concern for the recipient's feelings can lead to the mum effect, concern for one's own interests is also a motivator. This concern can encompass one's own feelings and how one is evaluated by others.

a) Desire to avoid negative feelings

Experiments have demonstrated that after one has shared negative information with other people, one's own mood goes down.[10] This occurs

6 Charles F. Bond and Evan L. Anderson, 'The Reluctance To Transmit Bad News: Private Discomfort or Public Display?' *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 23, no. 2 (1987): 176–87; Dibble, 'It's More Than Self-Preservation'.

7 Tesser and Rosen, 'The Reluctance To Transmit'.

8 Richard M. Ryan and Edward L. Deci, 'Self-Determination Theory and the Facilitation of Intrinsic Motivation, Social Development, and Well-Being', *American Psychologist* 55, no. 1 (2000): 68–78.

9 Abraham Tesser and Mary C. Conlee, 'Recipient Emotionality as a Determinant of the Transmission of Bad News', *Proceedings of the Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association* (1973): 247–48.

10 Abraham Tesser, Sidney Rosen and Thomas R. Batchelor, 'On the Reluctance to Communicate Bad News (the Mum Effect):

because of the phenomenon of *emotional contagion*, 'the tendency to automatically mimic and synchronize expressions, vocalizations, postures, and movements with those of another person's and consequently, to converge emotionally'.[11] People can unintentionally adopt the moods and emotions, especially negative ones, of others in almost any context where emotion is being displayed and interaction occurs, including both face-to-face and electronically mediated communication.[12]

People are generally motivated to seek positive feelings. However, when they share bad news with someone, they may adopt the negative feelings that they imagine or see in the recipient. From a social exchange (or cost-benefit) perspective, sharing bad news is costly; if a person is feeling good, he or she may lose this valued state upon sharing the bad news, experiencing negative feelings instead.[13] This desire to avoid negative feelings and moods may sometimes engender the mum effect.

b) Concern for self-presentation

The strongest driving force behind the mum effect appears to be the desire to protect one's reputation.[14] By simple association, the person who brings negative news will be linked to this news and the negative feelings it creates. As the Earl of Northumberland in Shakespeare's *Henry IV, Part 2* (Act 1, Scene 1), says, 'The first bringer of unwelcome news hath but a losing office and his tongue sounds ever after as a sullen bell remembered tolling a departing friend.' When a person is associated with negative feelings, the person (even when not the cause of the negative feelings) is more likely to be evaluated negatively by the person experiencing the feelings.

This negative association has been demonstrated in a behaviour-focused experiment.[15] People who delivered messages that created negative feelings were judged more severely than those delivering messages that the recipient wanted to hear. This phenomenon of wanting to 'shoot the messenger' is not a new phenomenon. Jesus exclaimed that the city of Jerusalem systematically put to death the messengers of God who brought unpleasant news (Lk 13:34), such as the prophets Uriah (Jer 26:20–23; Heb 11:37) and Zechariah (Mt 23:35).

A Role Play Extension', *Journal of Personality* 40, no. 1 (1972): 88–103.

11 Elaine Hatfield, John T. Cacioppo and Richard L. Rapson, 'Emotional Contagion', *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 2, no. 3 (1993): 96.

12 Adam D. Kramer, Jamie E. Guillory and Jeffrey T. Hancock, 'Experimental Evidence of Massive-Scale Emotional Contagion through Social Networks', *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 111, no. 24 (2014): 8788–90.

13 Russell Cropanzano and Marie S. Mitchell, 'Social Exchange Theory: An Interdisciplinary Review', *Journal of Management* 31, no. 6 (2005): 874–900.

14 Bond and Anderson, 'The Reluctance To Transmit'; Jayson L. Dibble and Timothy R. Levine, 'Sharing Good and Bad News with Friends and Strangers: Reasons for and Communication Behaviors Associated with the Mum Effect', *Communication Studies* 64, no. 4 (2013): 431–52.

15 Melvin Manis, S. Douglas Cornell and Jeffrey C. Moore, 'Transmission of Attitude Relevant Information through a Communication Chain', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 30, no. 1 (1974): 81–94.

The Northern Kingdom also had a history of killing prophets (e.g. 1 Kings 18:14). Jesus himself was put to death because of the negative sentiments that announcing his identity produced in the religious leaders (Mk 14:60–64). After Christ's death and resurrection, the trend continued; for example, the apostle Paul was imprisoned several times for announcing what was interpreted as very bad news (e.g. Acts 22:22–24).

Why does the desire to protect one's reputation (or save face) lead to the mum effect? People innately want to be positively evaluated by others, because our self-esteem is strongly affected by how others evaluate us.[16] Negative evaluations lead to a sense of social exclusion, which creates feelings of loneliness, anxiety and despair. Thus people avoid behaviours that lead to negative judgements and are motivated to perform behaviours that garner positive evaluations from others, a strategy known as self-enhancement.[17]

One very common way to pursue positive evaluations is *ingratiation*, or self-presentation efforts designed to convince the observer that one has desirable personal qualities.[18] Three common forms of ingratiation are *other enhancement* (saying positive things about a person or about something associated with the person in such a way that the person knows that the speaker has said them), *opinion conformity* (agreeing with a person's beliefs or values), and *doing favours* (acting to benefit a person in a way that will motivate the person to act beneficially towards the speaker due to reciprocity norms of behaviour). Sharing good news can achieve all three forms of ingratiation; it is typically appreciated by the receiver of the good news and thus enhances the presenter's reputation. Conversely, sharing bad news can have exactly the opposite effect.

Consider two Christians, Adam and Ben, who both wish to invite a non-Christian friend, Chris, to church. If Adam has communicated to Chris that there are some things about him that he really appreciates (other enhancement), that they share many views concerning social issues and personal responsibility (opinion conformity), and information about a reliable local air conditioning repairman (doing a favour), there is a strong possibility that Chris has concluded that Adam is trustworthy and will accept an invitation to come to church with him. With each act of ingratiation, which contained some element of positive news, Adam has earned the trust of Chris and has increased his ability to influence him.

In contrast, consider Ben's interactions with Chris. Ben has communicated to Chris that he needs to become a Christian because of his sin, that Ben does not agree with Chris's toler-

16 Mark R. Leary, Ellen S. Tambor, Sonja K. Terdal and Deborah L. Downs, 'Self-Esteem as an Interpersonal Monitor: The Sociometer Hypothesis', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 68, no. 3 (1995): 518–30.

17 William B. Swann, 'To Be Adored or To Be Known? The Interplay of Self-Enhancement and Self-Verification', in *Handbook of Motivation and Cognition: Foundations of Social Behavior*, vol. 2, ed. E. Tory Higgins and Richard M. Sorrentino (New York: Guilford Press, 1990), 408–48.

18 Edward E. Jones and Camille B. Wortman, *Ingratiation: An Attributional Approach* (New York: General Learning Press, 1973), 2.

ance of homosexuality, and that the painter Chris hired to paint his house did a poor job. By this point, from Chris's point of view, Ben is someone to avoid, as he is a continual source of bad news and negative judgement. If Ben tries to share more of the gospel with him, Chris will probably sense more bad news coming. He will likely find an excuse to end the conversation with Ben and will try to avoid future interactions with him.

In reality, unless Ben has very poor social skills, it is unlikely that he would have shared all this negative news with Chris. Ben most likely would prefer to come across as a good neighbour. The desire not to offend, sadden or be ostracized by Chris would push Ben towards more socially acceptable behaviour, such as remaining mum about such information. The social pressures behind the mum effect normally prevent such negative interactions from occurring.

III. Social Media's Effects on Sharing the Gospel

Although the social forces behind the mum effect have always existed and thus may have discouraged Christians from sharing their faith throughout church history, the nature of Internet-based social media has amplified these effects and has made evangelism even more difficult in the present context.

Social media, including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and a multitude of newer networks that may or may not become household names, have an enormous impact on modern culture, especially on millennials and Generation Y.[19] The smartphone has created a world in which most people are constantly a few inches, taps, and swipes away from finding out what other people are thinking and saying about them.[20]

On the positive side of this societal transformation, social media make both asynchronous and synchronous exchanges of information with a large number of people very easy. They permit the development of relationships through information exchange in a controlled environment, which can be especially attractive to people who are less at ease in face-to-face situations.[21] On the negative side, they encourage continual social comparison[22] between users, many of whom use social media to portray an idealistic lifestyle so as to create a positive image of themselves. This tendency appears to be creating a culture in which people feel inferior or insufficient compared to others.[23]

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19 Amanda Lenhart, Kristen Purcell, Aaron Smith and Kathryn Zickuhr, 'Social Media and Mobile Internet Use among Teens and Young Adults. Millennials', Pew Internet and American Life Project (2010), http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED525056.pdf.

20 Jacob Poushter, 'Smartphone Ownership and Internet Usage Continues To Climb in Emerging Economies', *Pew Research Center* 22 (2016), http://s1.pulso.cl/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/2258581.pdf.

21 David R. Dunaetz, Timothy C. Lisk and Matthew Shin, 'Personality, Gender, and Age as Predictors of Media Richness Preference', *Advances in Multimedia* 2015, no. 243980 (2015): 1–9.

22 Russell H. Fazio, 'Motives for Social Comparison: The Construction–Validation Distinction', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 37, no. 10 (1979): 1683–98.

23 Erin A. Vogel, Jason P. Rose, Lindsay R. Roberts and Katheryn Eckles, 'Social Com-

Cyberbullying has also become a common phenomenon, creating fear of public ridicule or humiliation for any beliefs or behaviours that fall outside the social norms promoted by the bully. This dynamic often leads to stress and suicidal ideation.[24] Since around 2012, when Americans and Europeans with smartphones first outnumbered those without smartphones, teen depression and suicide rates have increased dramatically, especially among teenage girls.[25] Our technology-inspired cultural transformation has a dark side that can produce many undesired effects.

This continual influx of information, often accompanied by comments written in an aggressive tone by people with a social or political agenda, can have a negative effect on Christians and their willingness to share the gospel with others. In a context where people can anonymously criticize and attack others with impunity, secular Western culture's narrative around Christianity has depicted it as an oppressive and intolerant worldview that is unacceptable in modern societies.[26] Christians are typically described as intolerant extremists who are cruel or insensitive to the felt needs of others and dismissive of science, and people who were raised as Christians often portray themselves as former believers who have rationally decided to reject Christian beliefs and values because of their lived experiences.[27] Such stereotypes may instil fear in Christians and discourage them from revealing their Christian identity online lest they become labelled or criticized inappropriately. This 'escalation of fear'[28] enables the dominant contributors to the new media to exert a disproportionate influence over those who primarily consume it.

Essentially, Christianity is widely depicted on social media as bad news. The exception to this pattern is those social media, such as Facebook, that filter by political or religious content and create an echo-chamber effect, where the user is primarily exposed to people who share his or her worldview or to advertisements designed to evoke anger and reinforce one's beliefs.[29] But because people, espe-

parison, Social Media, and Self-Esteem', *Psychology of Popular Media Culture* 3, no. 4 (2014): 206–22.

24 Robin M. Kowalski, Gary W. Giumetti, Amber N. Schroeder and Micah R. Lattanner, 'Bullying in the Digital Age: A Critical Review and Meta-Analysis of Cyberbullying Research among Youth', *Psychological Bulletin* 140, no. 4 (2014): 1073–1137.

25 Jean M. Twenge, 'Have Smartphones Destroyed a Generation?' *The Atlantic* (2017), www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/09/has-the-smartphone-destroyed-a-generation/534198/; Jean M. Twenge, Thomas E. Joiner, Megan L. Rogers and Gabrielle N. Martin, 'Increases in Depressive Symptoms, Suicide-Related Outcomes, and Suicide Rates among US Adolescents after 2010 and Links to Increased New Media Screen Time', *Clinical Psychological Science* 6, no. 1 (2018): 3–17.

26 Mary Eberstadt, 'Regular Christians Are No Longer Welcome in American Culture', *Time* (2016), http://time.com/4385755/faith-in-america/.

27 MediaSmarts, 'Media Portrayals of Religion: Christianity', http://mediasmarts.ca/diversity-media/religion/media-portrayals-religion-christianity.

28 David L. Altheide, 'Media Logic, Social Control, and Fear', *Communication Theory* 23, no. 3 (2013): 223.

29 Eytan Bakshy, Solomon Messing and Lada A. Adamic, 'Exposure to Ideologically

cially millennials and Generation Z (or the iGeneration), spend so much time on social media, their worldview is strongly influenced by the loudest voices on that platform.[30] The ubiquitous criticism of Christianity amplifies the fear of rejection associated with sharing the gospel, both online and in person.

The mum effect is arguably stronger now than at any time in the last millennium for most Christians, especially in the global north. Although most non-Christians who personally know evangelical Christians view them positively,[31] it is easy for Christians to overestimate the risk of rejection, criticism and losing face due to the mum effect. The highly visible criticism of Christians on social media increases the fear of being viewed as a bearer of bad news in all areas of life.

In an increasingly secular context, the growing reluctance to share the gospel makes fulfilling the Great Commission even more difficult. What can Christian leaders do to combat this phenomenon? How can the gospel be presented as good news rather than bad news?

IV. Distinguishing Between Outreach, Witnessing and Evangelism

One approach that Christian leaders can take to counter the mum effect is to clearly distinguish between various aspects of sharing the Christian faith with others. If we generally define *outreach* as building relationships, *witnessing* as sharing stories of what one has experienced with God, and *evangelism* as presenting all that a person needs to know to make a decision to follow Christ, then each of these aspects of sharing one's faith can be examined in light of the mum effect and the New Testament understanding of spiritual gifts. Some aspects of sharing one's faith can be done on the interpersonal level with less perceived risk of rejection and criticism, reducing the impact of the mum effect. In this way, non-Christians may also receive a more complete and comprehensive exposure to the gospel so that they can make informed decisions to follow Christ or not.

1. Outreach to Build Relationships

Outreach, as defined in the field of sociology, occurs 'when help, advice, or other services are provided for people who would not otherwise get these services easily'.[32] Although often seen as a particularly Christian concept, the term is used in both for-profit and nonprofit secular organizational contexts.

In Christian contexts, outreach ac-

Diverse News and Opinion on Facebook', *Science* 348, no. 6239 (2015): 1130–32; J. Miller McPherson, Lynn Smith-Lovin and James M. Cook, 'Birds of a Feather: Homophily in Social Networks', *Annual Review of Sociology* 27 (2001): 415–44.

30 Twenge et al., 'Increases in Depressive Symptoms'.

31 Barna Group, 'Talking Jesus: Perceptions of Jesus, Christians and Evangelicalism in England' (2015), www.talkingjesus.org/research/upload/Talking-Jesus.pdf; Pew Research Center, 'How Americans Feel about Religious Groups' (2014), http://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/11/2014/07/Views-of-Religious-Groups-07-27-full-PDF-for-web.pdf.

32 Longman 'Outreach in Sociology' (2015), www.ldoceonline.com/Sociology-topic/outreach.

tivities take on many different shapes, such as afterschool tutoring services for neighbourhood children, a coffee shop run by young adults, providing meals or shelter to homeless persons, an alternative festival in place of Halloween, or services to women caught up in human trafficking. The purpose of these outreach activities varies according to the context. Sometimes the central goal is to provide the recipients with needed services or information. In other cases, when outreach is conceptually linked to evangelism, the purpose is to develop relationships with people outside the church, in the hope of ultimately encouraging them to become Christians.[33]

However, a clear distinction must be made between outreach and evangelism. Whereas outreach seeks to build a social link between a non-Christian and a Christian, I define evangelism here as communicating all the information necessary so that someone can make a decision to follow Christ, typically in a structured, detailed presentation. Outreach by itself does not imply that anyone will hear the entirety of the gospel message in such a way as to make an informed decision whether to follow Christ.

Although outreach is necessary, it is not sufficient to lead people to a Christian commitment. Dunaetz and Priddy found that the value that the head pastor placed on outreach was, in fact, a negative predictor of numerical church growth.[34] This is perhaps due to a tendency to emphasize outreach at the expense of evangelism. Outreach without evangelism may be a sign of a church's decline, perhaps due to an inability or lack of desire to share the gospel with the people contacted through outreach. Outreach must be accompanied by evangelism to lead to numerical growth through conversion.

Even if accompanied by evangelism (that is, a clear and complete presentation of the gospel), outreach without the appropriate structures may be unfruitful. If a church has no culturally relevant programs or community-forming activities for the people whom church members are meeting through outreach, even conversions may not bring people into that congregation. For example, if an elderly congregation runs an afterschool tutoring program in a primarily immigrant neighbourhood, youth who make some type of profession of faith will not find their needs for fellowship and discipleship met by that congregation and will turn elsewhere.

Nevertheless, outreach is essential for a church to grow because it is often the non-Christian's first contact point with people who have put their faith in Christ. Similarly, it is often the non-Christian's first contact with

33 All such outreach must come from a sincere love for the other's well-being (Rom 12:9), free from ulterior motives associated with personal gain. All actions related to sharing the gospel should be done with 'full respect and love for all human beings' as described in the document 'Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World: Recommendations for Conduct', (2011), issued jointly by the World Council of Churches, the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, and the World Evangelical Alliance, *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 35, no. 4 (2011): 194–96.

34 David R. Dunaetz and Kenneth E. Priddy, 'Pastoral Attitudes That Predict Numerical Church Growth', *Great Commission Research Journal* 5 (2014): 241–56.

the church, which provides the community context necessary for biblical discipleship. In light of the mum effect, outreach is especially valuable because no bad news is involved. The services and activities provided, as well as the interactions with the Christians involved in the outreach activities, are typically positive, as they address the needs and desires of the non-Christians. Such relationship development fosters trust, which permits a more complete sharing of the gospel in a credible way and mitigates the mum effect.[35]

In addition, all Christians have the ability to do outreach when its purpose is defined as relationship building. Not all Christians are verbally gifted as evangelists or have the spiritual gift of evangelism (Eph 4:20; 1 Cor 12:30; 1 Pet 4:11), but all are called to love their neighbours. Verbal ability to communicate abstract concepts varies immensely between individuals.[36] Some Christians have limited cognitive abilities that make it difficult for them to accurately express in verbal form the abstract concepts that are part of the gospel. However, almost all Christians can develop relationships and act in a trustworthy manner, opening the hearts and minds of non-Christians to better prepare them for receiving and understanding the gospel message.

Although outreach is not enough to lead people to Christ, it is an essential form of pre-evangelism[37] that enables all believers to develop relationships with non-believers. These relationships, in turn, can provide opportunities for non-believers to hear and respond to the gospel. In outreach, Christians do not need to share any bad news, making such interactions attractive to both Christians and non-Christians.

2. Witnessing: Telling Stories about One's Experiences with God

Witnessing is also within the ability of virtually all believers and does not necessarily trigger the psychological phenomena that produce the mum effect. Unlike outreach, witnessing is explicitly mentioned in the Bible, usually with the word *martureō*, which is often translated as 'to testify' or 'to give testimony'. It is a legal term that essentially means to verbally recount what one has personally seen or heard, to transmit information to another person about what one has perceived.[38]

35 David R. Dunaetz, 'Missionary Credibility: Characteristics of the Messenger That Make the Message More Persuasive', in *God First: Essays in Honor of Michael M. Whyte and Gary D. Lemaster*, ed. David R. Dunaetz (Claremont, CA: Martel Press, 2019), 187–99; Alaina C. Zanin, Ryan S. Bisel and Elissa A. Adame, 'Supervisor Moral Talk Contagion and Trust-in-Supervisor: Mitigating the Workplace Moral Mum Effect', *Management Communication Quarterly* 30, no. 2 (2016): 147–63.

36 Charles J. Fillmore, Daniel Kempler and William S-Y. Wang, *Individual Differences in Language Ability and Language Behavior* (New York: Academic Press, 1979).

37 D. Jim O'Neill, *Teaming up with God: A Theology of Pre-Evangelism* (New York: Harcourt Custom Publishers, 1999).

38 Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, ed. and trans. William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 492–93; H. Strathmann, '*Martus*' (Witness), in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed.

Although witnessing might include conceptual abstractions, in most cases it involves talking about something one has experienced, typically through some sort of storytelling. In a Christian context, witnessing can include telling the story of how one became a Christian or how God has worked in one's life since conversion.

Storytelling is perhaps the main way in which people seek to persuade each other. This is especially true when two people experience sympathy between them because they have something in common or because of the nature of their relationship. When one person tells a story, especially a personal story, the storyteller draws the listener into a particular conception of reality. Storytelling increases the meaning of the events for both the storyteller and the listener, integrating the story's underlying assumptions into a comprehensible worldview.[39]

When Christians witness by telling the story of something that God has done in their life, they are strengthened in their faith as they put together the various pieces of God's interventions into an integrated narrative. When non-Christians listen to such a story, they are invited into a worldview where God is active, transforming and good. Such fundamental beliefs prepare them to respond to the gospel. Since witnessing involves telling a personal narrative, the information presented is unlikely to be interpreted as bad news, thereby averting the mum effect. Telling a personal story is much less threatening than communicating to a person all that he or she needs to know to respond to the gospel.

Like outreach, witnessing to what God has done in one's life is within the ability of virtually all Christians. The Samaritan woman at the well (John 4) serves as a paradigm for witnessing when she testified (*emarturēsen*), 'He told me everything I ever did' (Jn 4:39, NIV). Those uncomfortable with or incapable of explaining abstract concepts may still easily share stories with those around them about what they have experienced with God.

In contemporary legal contexts, the defendant or plaintiff is expected to be able to testify to what he or she has done, seen or heard. However, the lawyer is the one who argues the case, pulling all the testimony together through analysis and synthesis to make a comprehensive argument as to how the judge and jury should respond. Similarly, one gifted in *evangelism* (Eph 4:11) can argue more comprehensively for the need to follow Christ. Such clear and structured presentations are all the more persuasive when the non-Christian has previously heard others testify to what God has done in their lives.

3. Evangelism To Enable a Decision to Follow Christ

In contrast to outreach and witnessing, evangelism can be defined as presenting the complete content of the gospel so that the listener both understands it and knows how to respond to it. Whereas outreach may prepare a person to be receptive the gospel

Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans/Paternoster, 1985), 564–70.

39 Richard Delgado, 'Storytelling for Oppositionists and Others: A Plea for Narrative', *Michigan Law Review* 87, no. 8 (1989): 2411–41; Claude Lévi-Strauss, 'The Structural Study of Myth', *Journal of American Folklore* 68, no. 270 (1955): 428–44.

and witnessing may share parts of the gospel, evangelism, defined in this way, includes the communication of everything that a non-Christian needs to know to become a believer. Evangelism is an essential aspect of the Great Commission (Mt 28:19–20) because it provides the starting point for a life of discipleship.

Evangelism in this sense, unlike outreach and witnessing, may not be within the abilities of all Christians. Like all forms of teaching or transmitting information systematically, it requires verbal skills and a clear and culturally relevant explanation of abstract concepts, a skill set that not every Christian possesses (Jam 3:1). The New Testament recognizes that not all Christians have the same spiritual gifts. For example, Peter exhorts Christians to use the spiritual gifts they have received to serve one another, dividing the gifts into two major categories: gifts of speaking and of serving (1 Pet 4:10–11). Evangelism, along with preaching, teaching, counselling and encouraging, would fall into the category of speaking gifts.

Yet Christ calls his church to fulfil the Great Commission to make disciples throughout the world, and all Christians are called to give a reason for the hope that they have in Christ (1 Pet 3:15–16). The Great Commission is a multifaceted call that involves, among other processes, pre-evangelism (such as outreach and witnessing), evangelism, baptizing, teaching, incorporation of the new believers into a Christian community, and travel throughout the world to wherever non-believers live. No one individual or even a single church can completely carry out this command, but all Christians are to contribute towards its completion. Some elements of the Great Commission, such as pre-evangelism (outreach and witnessing) and incorporating new believers into a Christian community, require no special gifting and are the most obvious ways to demonstrate Christ's love to a new or potential disciple, so all Christians should be expected to participate in these activities.

Such acts of love would include Peter's command to all Christians to provide an answer or defence (*apologia*) when questioned about their hope in Christ. Like *martureō*, *apologia* is a legal term, describing an oral response made in court. Rather than representing all that one has seen or heard, it is the presentation of the reason for which one believes something. Such a defence can be complex and sophisticated (e.g. those of Anselm or Thomas Aquinas), or quite simple, like that of the man born blind who told the Pharisees, 'One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!' (John 9:25, NIV). But an *apologia* is not necessarily as detailed as an evangelistic presentation that thoroughly communicates the gospel. Not all Christians may be skilled or gifted in making such oral presentations.

Undoubtedly, many people do have the capacity for evangelism. The New Testament speaks of evangelists (*euangelistēs*) in several places. In Ephesians 4:11, evangelism is described as a gift to the church for equipping Christians for ministry. Philip, one of the seven chosen to serve tables (Acts 6:5), had a ministry of evangelism in Samaria (Acts 8) and was later described as an evangelist (Acts 21:8). Paul calls on Timothy to 'do the work of an evangelist' (2 Tim. 4:5 NIV), apparently because there was a need for evangelism and Timothy was capable of it, though perhaps

a bit hesitant because he did not view it as his primary calling. Similarly, there are many people in contemporary churches, including most pastoral staff, who are quite capable of evangelism. These people should receive training in evangelism and should be encouraged to use this gift whenever possible.

The presence of people gifted in evangelism who willingly share the gospel with others is an encouragement and an aid to Christians who are not gifted to do so. Whereas all Christians can help to lay the foundation through outreach and witnessing, not everyone should be pressured into doing the work of an evangelist or be caused to feel guilty if they do not regularly present the plan of salvation to non-believers, especially if they are not verbally gifted in doing so. Those who are gifted in evangelism will most likely communicate the gospel more clearly than those not so gifted. Regular public presentations of the gospel by people with the appropriate gifts allow all Christians to invite their friends and relatives to hear such presentations and to build on the foundation that they have laid through outreach and witnessing.

Sharing the gospel in large-group settings where audience members do not feel that they have a personal relationship with the speaker (such as Peter's experience at Pentecost, some of Philip's experiences in Samaria, and Paul's experiences in the synagogues) is especially strategic in light of the mum effect, which can make one-to-one gospel presentations awkward for both the presenter and the receiver. For someone without the appropriate abilities, trying to present a one-to-one gospel presentation may create feelings of coming across as judgemental, a sense of incompetence, the fear of rejection, or malaise due to saying things that make the receiver uncomfortable. These strong negative feelings associated with the mum effect have discouraged many people from doing personal evangelism. When churches communicate that such evangelism should be a normal practice for every believer, Christians not only feel guilty but may also be less likely to participate in relationship-building outreach and witnessing to what God has done in their lives, because such activities may be viewed as insufficient if not accompanied by gospel presentations.

One-to-one gospel presentations can also be awkward for the recipients of the message. Rather than communicating back to the presenter the bad news that they do not want to make a decision to follow Christ or do not understand the message, to avoid losing face or embarrassing the presenter they may give verbal assent to the message and even pray with the presenter, but with no intention of making any change in their life.[40] This action may effectively inoculate them against future gospel presentations.

These problems may be avoided in large-group settings where the speaker has the gifts necessary to communicate the gospel clearly in a culturally appropriate manner and does not have a personal relationship with the non-Christians in the audience that could be damaged by sharing information that is perceived as bad news. Although the content of the message may evoke negative feelings in the

40 Gerald L. Sittser and Carlos Calderon, 'Discipleship in Christendom … and Beyond', *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 54, no. 1 (2018): 25–30.

listener due to the convicting work of the Holy Spirit, the presenter is not concerned about being rejected by a friend and can focus on clearly communicating all that is necessary for the audience to respond to the gospel.

This does not imply that churches should give up training in personal evangelism or discourage one-to-one gospel presentations. Training in evangelism should be offered to all who wish to develop their abilities to share the gospel; such training and the experiences to which it leads help people to determine their gifts and how they can most effectively serve the Lord. However, a church program where the gospel is presented regularly and publicly gives all members the opportunity to invite non-Christian friends and relatives with whom they may have developed a relationship through outreach activities or to whom they have been witnessing by sharing how God has worked in their lives.

V. Conclusion

Jesus' call to make disciples is among the church's top priorities. However, evangelism is difficult for many Christians because of a lack of gifting. The mum effect, or hesitancy to share bad news, is due to negative feelings associated with making others feel uncomfortable, the fear of being rejected and a desire to protect one's own reputation, all feelings often associated with personal evangelism. In addition, the fear of being mocked or humiliated, as Christians often are in social media, makes many Christians even more hesitant to evangelize in one-to-one situations.

The mum effect and evangelistic gifting are two different phenomena. Those who are gifted in evangelism may not be thwarted by the fear of rejection, or they may be appropriately skilled in teaching and communication so as to minimize the likelihood of rejection. Similarly, the mum effect in no way cancels out the need for those not gifted in evangelism to contribute towards fulfilling the Great Commission. Because the church has some people who are gifted in evangelism, all Christians can participate in fulfilling the Great Commission in accordance with their own abilities. All can participate in outreach activities to develop relationships with non-Christians, and all can be witnesses of how they have experienced Christ in their own lives. Their outreach and witnessing position them to invite non-Christians to be exposed to gospel presentations made by those gifted in evangelism, which enable these listeners to fully understand their need for Christ and to respond to him if they are ready. At the same time, such presentations reduce the likelihood of loss of face or a damaged relationship if the listener is not yet ready.