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# Frangelism: Evangelizing by Storytelling

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Beat Lehmann, a successful businessman in Paris, uses the word *frangelism* to describe his approach to personal evangelism. FRAN is an acronym for friends, relatives, associates and neighbours. Alistair Begg, widely known senior pastor at Parkside Church in Cleveland, USA and the Bible teacher on the 'Truth for Life' radio program, uses the same expression.<sup>1</sup> The term 'frangelism' seems to express in a nutshell what evangelism means. In this paper, I argue for a broader use of the term.

## I. Gospelling: Spelling God's Story

In my latest book on evangelism I have suggested that we rethink our classic approaches to evangelism by referring to the old Germanic term *God-spell*, the etymological source of the modern-day word *gospel*. 'God-spell' translates as telling God's story, which is exactly what the New Testament does in describing the good

news, or the *evangel*, about Jesus the Son of God himself.<sup>2</sup>

To evangelize means to share the story of Jesus—his life, teaching, death and resurrection. He was God's messenger, proclaiming God's grace and forgiveness of sin through his own work of reconciliation. In him God reconciled himself with the world of man (2 Cor 5:18). The message is good news because the messenger marked the way to life. He is the good news in person. In other words, the messenger is the message, as D. George Vanderlip rightly says.<sup>3</sup> The apostle Paul wrote to Timothy, 'Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel, for which I am suffering even to the point of being chained like a criminal' (2 Tim 2:8–9).

The gospel is a story, the Jesus story. It is not simply a set of truths, but rather the truth lived by a person. Jesus said, 'I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Fa-

1 See Begg's 1994 audio message 'FRANgelism, Part One', available at <https://www.truthforlife.org/resources/sermon/frangelism-1friends-relatives-assoc-/>.

2 See the discussion in Johannes Reimer, *Gooseling: Lernen über Jesus zu reden* (Munich: Francke Verlag, 2019), 12.19–30.

3 D. George Vanderlip: *Jesus Christ: The Message and the Messenger* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2016).

ther except through me' (Jn 14:6). He is the bread of life (Jn 6:35), the light of the world (Jn 8:12), the good shepherd (Jn 10:10), the door to God's people (Jn 10:7), resurrection and life (Jn 11:25–26). In him is life (Jn 1:1–2), and salvation for the sinner is available in his name (Acts 4:12).

The most important question people on Earth can ask is who Jesus is (Mk 8:27–29). This question is the starting point of all discussion about God's way of life. This is, as the South African missiologist J. N. J. (Klippiers) Kritzinger puts it, 'a question of mission—a mission of questions.'<sup>4</sup>

The story of Jesus determines the content of what the good news is. And stories are narratives; they must be told as a story one knows, shared as a story one loves and lived as a life-changing story. Essentially, evangelism is storytelling. The New Testament powerfully marks the parameter of narrative evangelism. Frangelism is clearly biblically based. Let's examine the Scriptures.

## II. *Oikos*: The Context of Frangelism

Intensive evangelization through the apostolic church began soon after Pentecost with amazing effectiveness. In less than hundred years, a few relatively uneducated disciples of Jesus spawned a growing mighty stream of Jesus-followers in all major cities of the Roman Empire, reaching all strata of society and spreading the good news to the furthest corners of

the known world. All this happened in an age marked by primitive means of transportation and communication.

Unquestionably, this story is a miracle under the guidance of God himself, through the Holy Spirit, whom the believers confessed to be the Lord of mission (2 Cor 3:17). The apostolic church's method of evangelizing is quite interesting, however. Persecuted by the Roman state, the disciples were excluded from any means of mass evangelism. Their place of action was the private house.

Thomas Wolf is right when he claims that the norm of evangelism in the early church was *oikos* (household) evangelism. Michael Green, who studied intensively the practice of evangelism during the constitutive years of Christianity, sees in the private home the decisive factor for the fast spread of the gospel.<sup>5</sup>

The private house, characterized by intense relationships among family and friends, offered a platform for successful evangelization and allowed unprecedented growth of the church.<sup>6</sup> And the church consciously used family networks as a key for its missionary work.<sup>7</sup> Evangelism and consequently church development were centred on family and friends.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Michael Green, *Evangelisation zur Zeit der ersten Christen. Motivation, Methodik und Strategie* (Stuttgart-Neuenhausen, 1970), 240.

<sup>6</sup> Jörg Frey, 'Die Ausbreitung des frühen Christentums: Perspektive für die gegenwärtige Praxis der Kirche', in *Kirche zwischen Kultur und Evangelium*, ed. Martin Reppenhausen (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchner Verlag, 2010), 109.

<sup>7</sup> Frey, 'Die Ausbreitung', 105.

<sup>8</sup> For more detailed information on the role of families in evangelization during the ap-

<sup>4</sup> J. N. J. Kritzinger, 'A Question of Mission—a Mission of Questions', *Missionalia: Southern African Journal of Mission Studies* 30, no. 1 (April 2002): 144–73.

Concentration on private households could encourage a renewal of evangelistic activity today. Swiss theologian Jörg Frey rightfully encourages today's church to learn from the praxis of the apostolic church.<sup>9</sup> The correlation between successful mission and family-centred evangelization is well documented throughout the New Testament.<sup>10</sup>

At least four crucial factors determine the prominent role of the *oikos* for evangelism. First, in a private house Christians lived side by side with their relatives and those who belonged to the household. People could hardly hide their convictions. Life took place in an open space. Any change in attitude and behaviour was immediately noticed. Christians committed to following Jesus and his ethical standards could not escape being noticed. Accordingly, witness grew into an automatic exercise. The apostle Paul refers to those Christians as an open letter read by everybody (2 Cor 3:3). Living an alternative life in an open environment forced conversations on what was triggering such a lifestyle.

Second, the family was the most secure place for sharing the gospel. Family members would first and foremost protect one another, even when some members changed their religious convictions. Christians could function for a longer period of time unnoticed by the greater society, protected by family ties. This gave them time to influence and convince other

members of the family. Soon whole households turned to Jesus.

Third, family in the ancient world was not just the nuclear family of our day, consisting of father, mother and children. A number of generations lived under the same roof, sharing a common profession and space. Family was more like a clan, a close and related neighbourhood. Christians could easily reach substantial numbers of people without leaving the protected borders of their clan.

Fourth, religious associations in ancient Greek and Roman times were typically formed around private households. Markus Öhler shows, in his article on the Pauline praxis, that Paul was not particularly original in founding his church plants in private households, but rather was completely consistent with the culture.<sup>11</sup>

It is easy to see how the evangelistic praxis of the apostolic church targeted family members, friends and neighbours. In other words, it was frangelistic in nature. The private household or *oikos* set the frame and context in which evangelism as storytelling became the most powerful tool to spread the good news through the Roman Empire.

ostolic times, see Johannes Reimer and Wilhelm Faix, *Familien—Zukunft der Kirche. Zur Korrelation von Familie und Mission* (Munich: Francke Verlag, 2017), 77–83.

<sup>9</sup> Frey, 'Die Ausbreitung', 105–9.

<sup>10</sup> See Reimer and Faix, *Familien*, 86–103.

<sup>11</sup> Markus Öhler, 'Gründer und ihre Gründung. Antike Vereinigungen und die paulinische Gemeinde in Philippi', in *Der Philipperbrief des Paulus in der hellenistisch-römischen Welt*, ed. Jörg Frey and Benjamin Schliesser (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2015), 121–51; Markus Öhler, 'Römisches Vereinsrecht und christliche Gemeinden', in *Zwischen den Reichen. Neues Testament und Römische Herrschaft*, ed. M. Labahn and J. Zangenber (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2002), 51–71.

### III. Frangelism: Applying the Apostolic Method Today

Stressing the role of house groups in Christian evangelism is nothing new. The literature written on this issue is filling libraries. Numerous evangelical authors have addressed the topic.<sup>12</sup> Around the world, home groups are considered a key building block for successful church growth.<sup>13</sup> The pastor of the largest church in the world, the Korean David Yonggi Cho, claims that house cells of the church he leads determine their 'keys to evangelism'.<sup>14</sup> He relates the phenomenal growth of his church to the many house cells located in the neighbourhoods where church members live. The cells connect the message of the gospel with the day-to-day life of church members in a way that appears convincing to most people.<sup>15</sup> His church counts thousands of small-group cells.

A house cell or small group is not equal to a house church. Some authors claim that the house churches in the New Testament were independent churches, as indicated by the expression 'the church in their house' (see for instance 1 Cor 16:19; Rom 16:3–5; Phlm 2; Col 4:15).<sup>16</sup> Others

rather see one local church meeting in multiple private houses, as seems to have been the case in Jerusalem or Rome.<sup>17</sup> In this case, each house gathering would not have represented an independent church.

In this article I will not discuss the differences between or the implications of the two views, but will rather concentrate on the frangelistic role of the house as such.

It is crucial to note the basic difference between both the small house cell or house church and the *oikos* fellowship in the New Testament. The latter involved people from the immediate household and neighbourhood.<sup>18</sup> The fellowship was highly familiar, as the people shared work and life and knew each other well. In contrast, typical modern house cells and churches, at least in the Western and urban world, recruit their members from across long distances. Members of such groups seldom see one another beyond the group meeting or share life and work together. Usually they reflect a sense of 'our kind of people' and may be viewed as homogeneous social units, as proposed by

12 Neal Cole, *Klein und stark—Minigruppen: ein Weg zur ganzheitlichen Nachfolge*, 3rd ed. (Glashütten: C&P Verlag, 2005); Carl F. George, *Prepare Your Church for the Future* (Grand Rapids: Revell, 1994), 68ff.

13 Heino Masemann, *Hauskreise—Bausteine für Gemeindegarbeit* (Basel: Brunnen, 1992).

14 David Yonggi Cho, *Erfolgreiche Hauszellengruppen* (Cologne: Christliche Gemeinde Köln, 1987), 59.

15 Cho, *Erfolgreiche*, 60.

16 Robert Banks, *Paul's Idea of Community: The Early House Churches in Their Historical Setting* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans,

1988); Keith Smith, *Hauskirchen—Manifest für Deutschland* (Xanten: GloryWorld-Medien, 2009).

17 See especially R. W. Gehring, *Hausgemeinde und Mission. Die Bedeutung antiker Häuser und Hausgemeinschaften—von Jesus bis Paulus* (Giessen and Basel: Brunnen, 2000); H.-J. Klauck, *Hausgemeinde und Hauskirche im frühen Christentum* (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1981).

18 C. Claussen, 'Frühes Christentum zwischen Familie und Hausgemeinde', in *Haushalt, Hauskult, Hauskirche. Zur Arbeitsteilung der Geschlechter in Wirtschaft und Religion*, ed. E. Klinger, S. Böhm, and T. Franz (Würzburg: Echter Verlag, 2004), 61–77.

the American church growth movement, which has followed the ideas of Donald McGavran, founder of the School of Church Growth in Pasadena, California. McGavran suggested that an intentional concentration on such groups effectively promotes church growth.<sup>19</sup> His ideas have been widely disputed and even rejected as theologically unjustified.<sup>20</sup> Such specialized house cells or Bible studies, advocated by McGavran and many other writers on issues of evangelism and church growth, were completely unknown to the ancient apostolic church.

Surely, wider families living together under one roof, as was the case in ancient times, are a rare phenomenon in the Western world today. It thus seems rather difficult to copy the experience of the apostolic church. But neighbourhoods exist where people theoretically have access to each other's lives. In fact, communities worldwide exist in neighbourhoods. Outreach at the neighbourhood level is probably the closest thing to the New Testament *oikos* format, since the neighbourhood allows a high degree of sharing, helping, assisting one another in times of need, and so on.<sup>21</sup> And where church families involve their whole membership in witnessing holistically to neighbours, great things can happen.<sup>22</sup> Expanding one's

witness to social neighbours as well, such as co-workers, social contacts, and people with whom one shares hobbies or leisure activities, will obviously intensify the results.

Frangelism functions best in such a neighbourhood-based, friendly setting. No one proved the effectiveness of this system better than the ancient apostolic church.

#### IV. Frangelism: Steps Towards Effectiveness

Sharing the gospel frangelistically brings new evangelistic life into Western churches. What are the steps towards doing frangelism in the church?

First, concentrate your church life on equipping whole families for mission and evangelism. Witnessing must become the DNA of every church member, regardless of age or social status.

Second, help your families to start a meaningful social life in their neighbourhood. Teach them how to live without always talking about the gospel. Families who become centres of communal fellowship, neighbourhood assistance and help will soon attract those who feel left out, those in need of friends and love—the very things that Christians are called to give their fellow humans.

Third, teach your families to live and share the gospel at the right time, with the right words, and personally as much as possible. Things will change when more churches understand and follow this model. Frangelism is a way towards renewal and effectiveness for all churches.

<sup>19</sup> Donald McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980).

<sup>20</sup> Rene Padilla, *Mission Between the Times: Essays on the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 168; Johannes Reimer, *Die Welt umarmen. Theologie des gesellschaftsrelevanten Gemeindebaus*. Transformationsstudien, vol. 1, 2nd ed. (Marburg: Francke Verlag, 2013), 256–58.

<sup>21</sup> Reimer and Faix, *Familien*, 236–48.

<sup>22</sup> Alfred Yeo, 'The Local Church Reaches

Its Neighborhood', in Bruce J. Nicholls, *The Church: God's Agent for Change* (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1986), 186ff.