

The Bible Speaks To Me About My Witness

Session 5: Part 1 – To Whom?

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Session 5

To Whom?

Session Overview

Recognize who is ready to hear our message.
Learn the timing of evangelism
Application
Exam
Discussion Guide for Mentor and Participant

Learner Objectives

At the end of this session, you should:

- be able to discuss biblical examples of stages of readiness.
- understand different prospects' stage at being ready to hear the gospel.
- realize that the Holy Spirit works in all stages.

Introduction

Timing is everything, right? It's true in evangelism, too. Sometimes we're so eager to share our message that we don't realize people aren't ready to hear it. We have to focus on them and understand where they are spiritually. Then we plant seeds or reap the harvest, depending on how we feel the Holy Spirit is drawing them.



To Whom?

Notes

One day I met a lady who lived only two blocks from my parsonage. She had a church background but no evangelical understanding. The concept of new birth was a mystery to her. She expressed a little openness to spiritual things. Sensing she did not know Christ, I launched into a full-blown witness of my salvation. She seemed shocked. Later she said, “You’re the sincerest minister I ever met,” but she never attended my church a single time.

I had failed to analyze her readiness for the gospel. I saw only two groups of people—saved and unsaved. All unsaved needed to be saved, and I gave them all the same message.

I have matured since this first pastorate experience, and I realize that some unsaved people are more open to the gospel than others. Prospect recognition now has an important place in my witnessing efforts. A prospect is a person who needs Jesus. He or she is a prospective receiver of the Good News. Prospect recognition is the witness’s awareness of the prospect’s receptivity.

Who Is Ready?

Jesus began His ministry in Galilee. This small 25– x 50–mile area was the most fertile region of Palestine. In it were 204 villages, each with a population of more than 15,000. Because the area was surrounded by Gentiles, was an often-conquered area, and major commercial routes passed through it, it was especially open to new ideas. In his commentary *The Gospel of Matthew*, William Barclay called it “the one place in all Palestine where a new teacher with a new message had any real chance of being heard.”

Further, Jesus started His ministry in the most comfortable setting—the synagogue (Matthew 4:23–25). Verbal address was a common part of synagogue worship, and any person recognized as suitable by the synagogue president could give it. Though His message was not always comfortable, this setting was comfortable for both Jesus and His hearers. This example supports the idea of laypeople giving their witness or testimony in the church: It is a comfortable setting and a good beginning place.



Not only did Jesus model a ministry that used prospect recognition, but also He taught it. In Matt. 7:6, He warned His disciples against giving sacred truths to hardened or unappreciative hearts. In 10:11–16, Jesus told them to search for a “worthy person” in the newly entered town. The groups with which the disciples should not spend much time were those who “will not welcome you or listen to your words.” Jesus wanted us to be careful stewards of time, energy, and resources, saying we were to “be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves.” The parable of the sower (13:1–23) may be interpreted as the need to find the most productive soil. John 4:35 teaches that by observing the prospects, a person should be able to tell if they are ready to accept the gospel.

Jesus’ approach to Nathanael in Matt. 1:47, one “in whom there is nothing false,” indicates we should begin our witnessing with the best prospects, the best prepared, the most spiritually honest and hungry. In *Matthew for Today*, Michael Green wrote:

Jesus warns His disciples against wasting time on the hardened . . . It is an irresponsible use of time and effort to hammer on a door that is firmly closed. The disciples should push on a door and, if it is ajar, enter. . . . Disciples of Jesus are not to be storm troopers for the Kingdom of God. They should be equipped with the most sensitive radar to see where the Spirit of God is already preparing the way, and only then move in.

Even the events surrounding the witness tend to help us concentrate on the most responsive. When Paul went to Thessalonica, he followed the most comfortable pattern. Acts 17:2 says, “As his custom was, Paul went into the synagogue.” In his ministry there, some Jews were persuaded, but others became jealous and opposed him. The Christians got Paul out of town as soon as possible.

The next stop was Berea, and Luke notes the difference in responsiveness: “Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians . . . Many of the Jews believed” (vv. 10–12).

It is important for us to be alert to the issue of the recognition of good prospects, because many Christians have become discouraged by spending all their witnessing efforts on a few who are obviously unresponsive. The best way to deal with a presently unresponsive person is prayer and alertness to future signs of responsiveness.



Are there any signs that indicate when a person is a good prospect and more inclined to be open to the gospel? Yes! People are more apt to be ready to accept Christ when

1. They have gone through an insecurity-producing situation.
2. They begin to discuss spiritual things.
3. They show signs of moving toward God.

The Philippian jailer accepted Christ after an insecurity-producing situation, a violent earthquake (Acts 16:25–34). However, an insecurity-producing situation need not be calamity or tragedy. Happy events can have insecurity-producing overtones. It could be a new home, new neighborhood, new job, new responsibility, new marriage, new baby, new school. It may be sad experiences—illness, death of loved one, a compulsive alcohol or drug habit, or divorce.

I saw an older man come to Christ. I tried to analyze why. Then I remembered he had just retired—a new phase of life for him. The change points of life can especially be times for people to come to Christ.

In a previous chapter I told the story of a young relative's conversion to Christ. Two years before her conversion, she had attended revival services where I had preached. One night I had an especially good talk with her. I was hoping I could prompt some spiritual discussion. Yet, I had to be careful. I asked, "What do you see happening in your life in the next few years?" Her response included her support of some of the family's traditional values.

After her conversion, I asked her about that conversation. She said, "I was willing to talk, but I wasn't willing to make a commitment!" Yet, the willingness to talk was a positive signal.

Church membership or religious sentiment does not necessarily mean a person is a Christian. These people may need to hear the gospel. I had been a church attender for 15 years and was a church member when someone made the gospel plain enough to me so that I could accept it.

When Paul went to Philippi, the first step he took to find prospects for the gospel was to go to a prayer meeting. There he found Lydia, already a worshiper of God but longing for more. Acts 16:14 says, "The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message." She became a strong leader in the Early Church. Paul found her when she was moving toward God.



Rev. Dale Galloway once told me that he especially noted people in the congregation who had broken a pattern of absence and suddenly showed up in church. When he called on these people, he estimated 70 percent of them accepted Christ. I

f I had a choice to call on Bill with little church background but who had come to church the last two Sundays or John who was faithful in the church every Sunday for 10 years but had not come at all for the last 4 years, I would call on Bill. Bill is moving toward God. John is moving or has moved away.

A Way to Understand Readiness

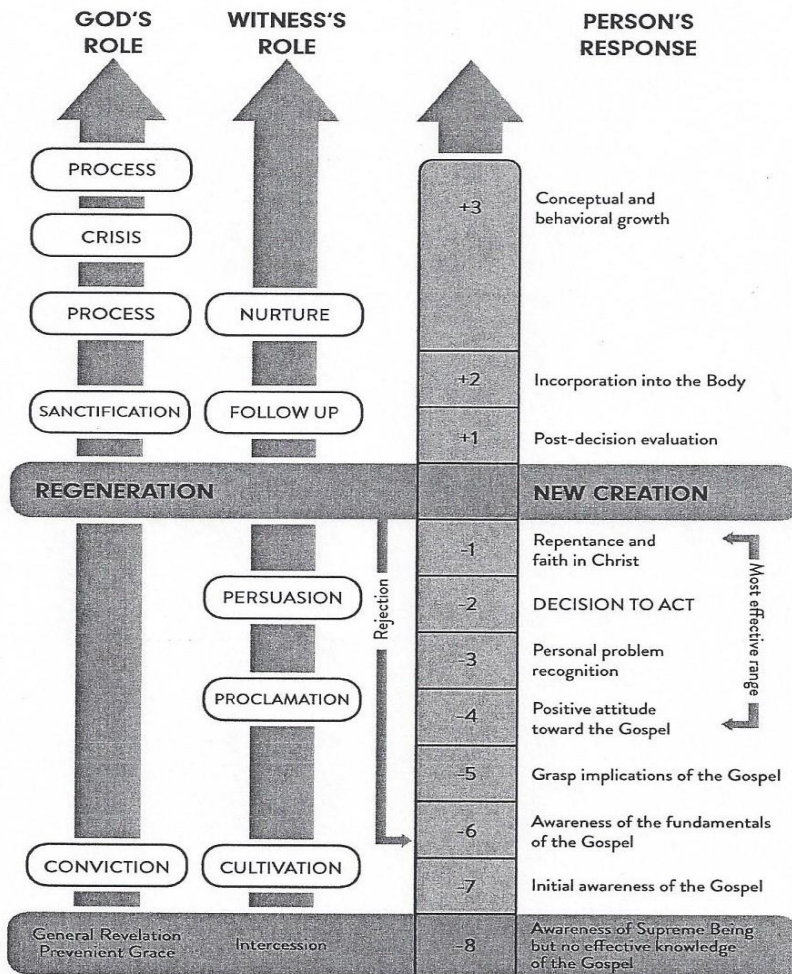
James Engel and Wilbert Norton helped me understand the importance of prospect receptivity in their Spiritual Decision Process Model, as published in their book, *What's Gone Wrong with the Harvest?*

In that model, individuals are ranked based upon their knowledge, interest in, or response to the gospel. A person who has passed through the state of “initial awareness of the gospel” to a “positive attitude toward the gospel” is a better prospect for receiving Christ than a person who is still only at the “initial awareness of the gospel” stage. A person at the “personal problem recognition” stage is even more likely to receive Christ than the individual at “positive attitude toward the gospel.” The one with “personal problem recognition” has not only understood the gospel and come to like the gospel but now has a strong felt need for change. Because of this combination of factors, this person is most likely to accept Christ.

Study my adaptation of the model. Personal problem recognition” people have often gone through an insecurity-producing situation. Where would the prospects you listed fit on this chart?



SPIRITUAL DECISION PROCESS MODEL



Taken from *What's Gone Wrong With the Harvest?* by H. Wilbert Norton and James F. Engel
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We also say of prospects, "The more natural, the better."

When Rev. Dallas Mucci was considering the acceptance of a pastorate in Greater Pittsburgh, he asked the board members if they would take him to lunch with their business associates. They agreed, Mucci accepted the pastorate, and the board members invited him and their friends to lunch.

Rev. Mucci had the privilege of seeing numbers of those contacts come to Christ and become active in the church because he was following natural



channels. It is far more difficult to see the same results with “cold turkey” door-to-door calling. However, door-to-door calling will produce some results. It should not be despised, especially if the church has no other leads or prospects.

The late Dr. James Kennedy’s *Evangelism Explosion* has had a major influence in our world in promoting witness and personal evangelism. In his book, Dr. Kennedy suggested an order of prospects with best prospects listed first:

1. People who have visited our services
2. Relatives and friends of new believers
3. Parents of children who have attended Sunday School (if Sunday School teachers have visited in the home)
4. Those who have bought new homes in the area.

This listing confirms the principle: the more natural, the better.

Sowing and Reaping

If we depend mainly on pastors and evangelists for evangelism, there will be little or no growth of the Kingdom. On the other hand, if the great army of the laity can be mobilized, growth will be explosive. Witnessing laymen will strengthen the pulpit, because many people will not believe the preaching of the pulpit until it is backed up by the testimony of the pew. Public testimony, both planned and spontaneous, is a powerful tool for drawing people to Christ. Some will not even make their first step into the church until personal witness has paved the way.

My mother had been living a godless life for more than 25 years. When I came home the Christmas following my conversion to tell her I had found Jesus, she developed a strange hunger for God. She moved from twice-a-year church attendance to regular attendance at a Nazarene church. In a revival under a Nazarene evangelist, she was saved. She became a radiant Christian, but the awakening in her and the subsequent church attendance happened only after personal witness. I had the privilege of sowing. The evangelist had the privilege of reaping.

Notice the language of Jesus in John 4:34–38. The field is ripe for harvest.



To harvest when the crop is ready is important; timing is of the essence. We do not want to harvest too early—when the crop is not yet developed or the fruit is green. On the other hand, we do not want to wait so long we lose the crop. When Cambodian refugees began to move to our area, and a few began to visit our church, we knew we had about one year’s time to reach them with the gospel. After a year, they would be infected with materialism, their openness would turn to guardedness, and the harvest would be lost. We established an English as a second language Sunday School class for Cambodians. Soon we were averaging more than 50 a Sunday in Cambodian attendance. Later these Cambodians established their own church, with a Cambodian pastor.

The language of John 4 stresses both sowing and reaping. Apparently the sower prepares the ground and plants the seed. The reaper harvests the results of the sower’s efforts.

Paul warns us not to become proud of what we do to produce harvest. In what I call the law of harvest, Paul says in 1 Cor. 3:6, “I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow.” No pride over either planting or watering – because only God can make things grow (v. 7). Note that harnessing our pride does not remove our responsibility. Verse 9 goes on to say, “We are God’s fellow workers.”

In Matt. 9:35-38, Jesus has staked out a “Help Wanted” sign. He has studied the crowd with compassion; He has counted them as harvest. They should be gathered before the storm so that they are not lost. He asks His disciples to pray that the Lord will “send out workers into his harvest field” (v. 38). In the next chapter, we see that the ones who prayed are the same ones who are sent. With William McCumber in *Matthew, Vol. 1* of the Beacon Bible Expositions, we say, “Without exalting man or belittling God, we insist that Jesus needs help to gather His harvest.”

It is important that our harvesting flow from compassion. Jesus had compassion on the multitudes. He was concerned about their sickness (Matt. 14:14), demon oppression (Mark 9:22), sorrow (Luke 7:13), hunger (Matt. 15:32), loneliness (Mark 1:41). Yet most supremely He was concerned because they were common people desperately longing for God. William Barclay described the scene in *The Gospel of Matthew*:

The Pharisees saw the common people as chaff to be destroyed and burned up; Jesus saw them as a harvest to be reaped and to be saved. The Pharisees in their pride looked for the destruction of sinners; Jesus in love



died for the salvation of sinners . . . The harvest will never be reaped unless there are reapers to reap it . . . *Jesus Christ needs [people]* . . . He was never outside Palestine, and there was a world which was waiting . . . It is the dream of Christ that every [person] should be a . . . reaper.

Someone you know needs Jesus now!

When a Christian establishes a friendship with a non-Christian, the Christian is sowing seeds and cultivating soil. People are more apt to become Christians if they already have Christian friends. People are more apt to stay Christians if they have Christian friends.

In John 4:38, Jesus teaches that the reapers reaped what they did not work for. The sowers did the hard work. But Jesus is not saying that harvesting is an easy task. Sowing requires more patience, love, and plain inconvenience—with less visible results. And though harvesting does not entail the long-range work, it is intentional and intensive action.

When the harvest is standing ripe in the fields, a breakdown in equipment or shortage of laborers does not cause the farmer to casually say, “Oh, I’ll wait till next year.” No! The nature of the harvest demands that we get the job done now. Let’s face it – both sowing and reaping are hard work. Remember it in discouraging days. Paul had to remind his people, “Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up” (Gal. 6:9).

Sometimes we are tempted to honor the reapers and forget the sowers. Jesus said, “Even now the reaper . . . harvests the crop for eternal life, so that *the sower and the reaper may be glad together* (John 4:36, italics mine).

In 1986 Dr. Bruce Taylor was sent to Nigeria to strengthen a fledgling Church of the Nazarene in that country. The individual and group he was sent to help did not seem cooperative.

In the midst of Dr. Taylor’s frustrated efforts, another group and leader emerged. It seems that during World War II, Nigerians serving in that cause met some Nazarene servicemen. These servicemen witnessed and left literature with a spiritual message with these Nigerians. The Nigerians took the literature home, were impressed by what they read, and sensed an identity with the message of the Church of the Nazarene. They discovered an address of the publishing house on the literature. They wrote and got a *Manual* explaining the beliefs, practices, and policy of the church. In 1946



they established the Church of the Nazarene in Nigeria on their own.

On Easter 1987 Dr. Taylor and Rev. John Seaman had the privilege of receiving 40 churches and 6,500 Nigerian members officially into the international Church of the Nazarene. And all of this happened because some soldier boys sowed some seed many years before. A little seed can go a long way.

For several years now I have been talking about three groups of workers in the church. These are cultivators, converters, and conservers. The cultivator is the sower of seed. He or she may have the gift of hospitality and knows how to build bridges of friendship to the unsaved. This person witnesses. The converter may have the gift of evangelism and deals with people in intensive face-to-face encounter and leads them to Christ. Not only are the facts of the gospel presented, but there is a call to decision. This person may be called soul winner, reaper, personal evangelist, or harvester. The conserver may have gifts of exhortation, encouragement, pastor, or teacher. A special concern for people equips the conserver to follow up and establish new Christians in their faith.

Because of spiritual gifts, we may find ourselves most comfortable spending much of our ministry in one particular realm. Yet we must not allow the teaching about gifts to become an excuse for spiritual irresponsibility. You would not accept the argument, "I don't have the gift of liberality, so I won't tithe." You wouldn't contend: "I don't have the gift of intercession, so I won't pray." Likewise, we cannot say, "I don't have the gift of evangelist, so I won't witness." All Christians are expected to tithe, pray, and witness. Witness was the pattern of New Testament laity. The calls of Christ to witness are to all Christians.

However, let's not forget that any part a person plays in bringing someone to Christ is a good thing. There is a lot of glory in harvest, but no one can harvest unless many people sow. Jesus said, "The sower and the reaper may be glad together" (John 4:36). Those involved in the early witness that starts a person to Christ and those involved in the final witness just before conversion are both valuable.



Application

You have been praying for five people who need Jesus. You hope to witness to them. You realize your witness should flow from a rich daily relationship with Christ, empowered by the Spirit. Now based on what you've learned about who is ready, list your prospects in the order of most responsive first.

PROSPECTS IN ORDER OF RESPONSIVENESS



EXAM – Session 5

1. We may be helped in our efforts to find the most responsive people to the Gospel by _____
 - a) Jesus teaching his disciples to take the Gospel to anyone they came across.
 - b) Paul's repeatedly and most frequently beginning his preaching in the public square of any city he visited.
 - c) recognizing that Jesus' disciples are not to be storm troopers for the Kingdom of God. They should be equipped with the most sensitive radar, see where the Spirit is preparing the way, and only then move in.
 - d) Jesus approaching Nathanael, knowing his deceitfulness made him most needy of the Gospel.

2. Which statement does not fit? People are more apt to be ready to accept Christ when _____
 - a) they have gone through an insecurity-producing situation.
 - b) they begin to discuss spiritual things.
 - c) they know twenty-five verses of Scripture, but have not been to a single church service for eight years.
 - d) they show signs of moving toward God instead of away from Him.

3. The Spiritual Decision Process Model teaches that _____
 - a) a person's regeneration is entirely dependent on the effectiveness of a witness.
 - b) regeneration (or conversion) will more likely occur if the prospect has moved up the model at least to the place of "positive attitude toward the Gospel" or "personal problem recognition."
 - c) God's role is conviction and regeneration, but He has little need to do more with the prospect after that.
 - d) someone like the Philippian jailer could accept Christ, even though things were very calm at the jail.



4. Dr. Shaver teaches about three groups of workers in a healthy church. The one group he did not include was the _____

- a) cultivators.
- b) converters.
- c) conservers.
- d) conquerors.



Discussion Guide for Mentor and Participant

1. Ask your mentor to tell you how he or she became a Spirit-filled, fully sanctified Christian or how that became a reality for someone he or she knows.
2. Find three evidences of connection between the Holy Spirit and witness in Scripture (beyond what was presented in this lesson), and report them to your mentor.
3. Tell your mentor of a time that the Holy Spirit empowered you after prayer or when you sensed the Holy Spirit helped you in a witness. Ask for your mentor's reactions to your example.
4. Discuss what most makes you want to witness for Christ to another person.