

“This is not a book about evangelistic technique but about doing evangelism biblically. There is a difference! Beginning with some of the everyday scenes in the gospels and then examining some of the parables, Jerram Barrs shows us that Jesus had no wooden formula which he followed, but rather was about engaging people in the depths of their being. As a result, this is an unusually wise guide to doing evangelism. The great truths of the gospel shine forth undiminished while at the same time the recesses of the human heart are explored with real insight.”

—DAVID F. WELLS, Distinguished Research Professor,
Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary

“It is my privilege to have known Jerram Barrs for forty years, first as a student, later as a faculty colleague, always as a friend. In this work, he invites us to follow Jesus’ example in seeking the lost, as he himself has done over the course of his life since Jesus found him as a despairing university student. The fruit of those years of evangelistic experience comes to expression here for our benefit as he traces Jesus’ interaction in the Gospels with various individuals and groups, as he goes about his business of seeking and saving the lost. Each retelling brims with exegetical insight and existential grasp of what’s going on at the time, followed by a section on ‘learning from Jesus’ that is full of practical wisdom, encouragement, and contemporary challenge. The whole book fairly breathes the Spirit of Christ, which is only to be expected from Jerram (as he is known to one and all) who embodies so well in his own life the example of Jesus.”

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LEARNING EVANGELISM
FROM JESUS

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LEARNING
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FROM JESUS

JERRAM BARRS

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Learning Evangelism from Jesus

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To Jesus,
with the prayer that you
will be pleased to be honored
as the greatest evangelist
by all who read this book.
Thank you, Lord!

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I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be sanctified in truth.

I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.

JOHN 17:14-23

THE CHRISTIAN'S CALLING TO THE WORLD

What is the calling of Christian believers with regard to the unbelieving world in which we live? On the night before he died, Jesus prayed that the Father would send us into the world, just as he was sent into the world. He also prayed that the Father would keep us from the evil one. He recognized, too, that just as he was hated by the world, so Christian believers would also be hated by the world. The relationship of Christians to the cultures in which we live is a complex one. Reading the words that Jesus prayed for his church in John 17:14–23 will help us see this complexity. Jesus addresses many issues in this specific passage, but here we will focus on those that relate to our calling in the world. We begin with the reason why the Father sent Jesus into the world—here we will have to draw on earlier statements made by Jesus that are recorded for us in John's Gospel.

THE FATHER'S LOVE FOR THE WORLD

Jesus came into this world of unbelief, rebellion against God, and disobedience to God's commandments in order to reach the world with his love. He was sent by the Father to live a life of full obedience to the Father's word, and then to offer up his life as a sacrifice for the world, because of the Father's great love for the world. Whoever believes in Jesus will be granted God's forgiveness and acceptance and becomes a child of God, born by the Spirit into his family.

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SENT INTO THE WORLD BY JESUS

Just as Jesus was sent into the world by the Father, so he sends all those who believe in him into the world. The Christian's calling is never to retreat from the world of unbelievers into an enclave where there are only fellow Christians, nor is it a calling to personal separation, where the only people one knows are fellow believers, for as we see in the Gospels, Jesus lived among those who did not know him.

THE HOSTILITY OF THE WORLD

In the world we can expect hostility and even hatred, for Jesus experienced this from some of those around him. The reason for this is that the world is a place where many do not honor God, trust in his love, or walk in his ways. The world is also a place where Satan, the evil one, is actively at work, seeking to keep people satisfied with anything but the worship of God alone.

IN, BUT NOT OF, THE WORLD

While Christians are to be in the world, they are to live not in conformity to the standards of the world, but rather in obedience to the Father's word, just as Jesus did. We are to be in the world, but not of the world. Our calling is to give ourselves to being made holy by the truth of God's Word, by the wisdom of his laws, and by the power of his Spirit.

DEMONSTRATING THE TRINITY'S LOVE

We are to seek to demonstrate in our lives the perfect love that has existed between the Father and the Son through all eternity. It is the reality of love in our lives which will be one of the most powerful means of people in the world seeing the beauty of the message of Christ. By our love people will know that the Father sent the Son into the world. By our love for one another, people will know that we are loved by God.

PRAYING FOR THE WORLD

The world is also a place where we must pray, just as Jesus prayed. We are to pray for ourselves, for our faithfulness to the Father's word and

his call, for all others who come to faith in Jesus through the Word, and also for the world to come to know Jesus through our lives, through our love, through the Word, and by the Spirit.

The heart of all these points is that we are to be in the world as Jesus was in the world. To express this call in another way, we might say that we are to imitate Jesus.

THE PROBLEM OF CONFORMITY

However, this calling to imitate Jesus is very challenging. As we live in the world we find two great problems. One is that, very easily, we find ourselves conforming to the world's values and lifestyle. We can look at any human culture and, unhappily, we can predict the areas where Christians are likely to be living in disobedience to God's commandments, rather than imitating Jesus.

It should be no surprise to any thoughtful Christian that many young male believers struggle with addiction to Internet pornography. Nor should it be any surprise that almost all of us Christians who live in the Western world find ourselves deeply trapped in the idolatry of money and possessions. We can also expect that we will find ourselves wanting to live for our own personal happiness and fulfillment without regard for the needs of other people. Each of these ways of thinking, seeing the world, and living are such basic parts of our cultures today that we find it difficult to walk in the ways of the Lord. We are not much like Jesus, for he was not shaped by the ungodly patterns of the culture of his day; rather, he lived in the world in perfect conformity to his Father's commandments.

THE PROBLEM OF RETREAT AND SEPARATION

But we also experience another problem. Because it is so difficult to live faithfully in the world, we are tempted to retreat from the world of sin and unbelief, and to develop a negative and superior attitude toward our neighbors in the world. Consequently many barriers arise between us and other people whose beliefs and way of life are different from our own. These barriers might come from pride in our own convictions and our own perceived rejection of worldliness. Or,

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we may find ourselves being hostile to others because of their beliefs or because of their manner of life. Such barriers may lead us, our church members, and our children to personal separation from them. Believers in Christ can, all too readily, desire a kind of cultural isolation. We say, “We are to be separate,” and so we have nothing to do with those around us. In this way we avoid the calling to be in the world, for we are so intent on keeping ourselves, our fellow believers, and our children “pure” and “apart” from anyone whose thinking and life is not exactly like our own.

Yet we ought not to be surprised or shaken by the false beliefs, disinterest, or even hostility of the world. Jesus’ prayer, and the whole Scripture, teaches us that this is exactly what we are to expect in the world. All through this age we will be living and working among unbelieving people: people who do not know the Lord; people who do not love him; people who believe very differently from us; people who do not walk in obedience to his laws. However, it is precisely this world to which the Lord sends us; it is such people whom the Lord calls us to live among; and he calls us to reach out to them—whether we want to hear such a calling or not. Even the most surface reading of the New Testament makes it clear that this is the church’s task all through the present age.

IMITATING JESUS IN THE WORLD

Instead of retreating, isolating ourselves, and condemning unbelievers and our culture, Jesus calls us to something very different. He desires that we give ourselves to the understanding of the culture around us; he urges us to stop condemning the world and unbelievers; his passion is for us to listen to his prayer for us, that we might be in the world as he was in the world; he is eager for us to imitate him and to give our lives gladly to love and to serve non-Christians. His desire is that we be like him, and that we commit ourselves to developing intimate relationships with non-Christians. He wants us to teach our church members and our children to do the same—no matter what the belief system and the lifestyle of the people around us.

The theme of this book is that Jesus, the Son of God, shows us the

way to be in the world. It is my deep conviction that our evangelism, both in theory and practice, must be shaped not only by the general teaching of Scripture but also, indeed most of all, by imitating the pattern of Christ.

Now, it is no simple matter to say: “Imitate Jesus.” We are not all called to be celibate like him. Nor are we all called by the Lord to be itinerant evangelists. Nor is every Christian commanded by our Father to be healers of all who are sick with every kind of disease (though we often wish we could do this when someone we love is sick or dying). It is not our place to turn water into wine at every wedding celebration we attend (though we might wish we could!). Nor is every believer asked by the Lord to die in early maturity as a martyr. We are not called to imitate Christ in every aspect of his life—so much is evident. But, in what ways are we to imitate him?

JESUS' MORAL PERFECTION

We are to observe the way God's moral perfection shines forth from him. We see how he lives a human life that is fully conformed to the image of God. We hear him committed to speaking only the words the Father wants him to say, and to say every word in a manner that delights the Father's heart. We see him waking up each morning eager to listen to his Father's voice and to do whatever pleases him. We learn that he does everything set before him in the power of the Spirit.

As we observe this perfection in his life and in his words we can draw ethical teaching for the lives of all believers. We can also draw principles to govern our practice for all our relationships with others, both believers and unbelievers, and for all our communication of the truth. These lessons that we can learn by considering the example of Jesus will apply to all Christians—including those who have the particular calling to be teachers and evangelists.

JESUS' ETERNAL GLORY

What are some of the convictions that we hold about Jesus? All Christians acknowledge that he is the Creator of all things who upholds this universe by the Word of his power. He is the one who all

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through history has revealed his glory through the unwritten words of creation. He is the eternal Word bringing light to those who dwell in darkness. He is the mighty God who was born as a human baby that he might become our Savior. He is the great High Priest who prays for the forgiveness of his enemies. He is the one who died for unbelievers and who rose again to justify them before God. He is the one who will come again to reign with all those who put their hope in him.

THE GREATEST EVANGELIST

In addition to these glorious truths, when we look at Jesus' life and ministry we also see that he was the greatest evangelist. In his earthly ministry he was the light of the world, the one who always lived in a way that was pleasing to his Father. Therefore, he was the one above all others who made the truth about God beautiful and lived in this world attracting those around him to the Father. He was the one who in every moment of his life for thirty-three years filled every word he spoke with grace and truth.

Now that he is raised and ascended to the Father's right hand, he continues his saving work. He, even now, is the one who draws men and women to himself, so that, whenever we seek to obey his call and take up the task of evangelism, we discover that he has already done the hard work. We are simply his fellow laborers. This conviction that Jesus does the main work of calling people to faith is a truth that all Christians affirm when we reflect on how people are saved. However, it is often forgotten when preachers climb into the pulpit and proclaim the gospel. It is all too easy to begin to think that it is our preaching gifts, or our exposition of the Word, that is the primary means of salvation. But, it is not just preachers who forget that Jesus does the greatest part of the work of bringing others to faith. We all tend to lose our memories when we get into conversation with our unbelieving family members, friends, neighbors, and coworkers. We begin to think that it is all up to us, when in reality, along with our efforts, we should most of all be asking the Lord to do his work in the hearts of those we long to see come to faith.

The theme of this book will be that Jesus is the greatest evangelist.

The Christian's Calling to the World

As we read the four Gospels we learn that Jesus is the best example of how we are to relate to those we meet, whatever their views, whatever their way of life. He is the best example of how we are to live before unbelievers and how we are to love them, serve them, and speak truth to them. We may also add that his apostles, as his first representatives whom he sent out into the world, learned to obey his command to go to all the nations with the gospel; and they also learned to imitate the example Jesus had set in his life.

THE REGULATIVE PRINCIPLE

Much of the church throughout her history has treasured what has been called the “regulative principle” with regard to worship and the structure of church life. This principle simply means that in our church life we have sought to follow the explicit teaching of Scripture wherever such teaching is present. Our worship is to be governed by the teaching of God’s Word about worship and by the worship practices that we find described in Scripture. In like manner, our patterns of church leadership are to be shaped by the command of Scripture and by the pattern of leadership we see in the New Testament church.

It is my deep conviction that our evangelism both in theory and practice ought also to be shaped by the teaching of Scripture and the example that Scripture sets before us. As soon as we reflect on this subject of evangelism, it is evident that Jesus is the greatest evangelist. It is impossible to imagine any Christian disagreeing with that statement. If we stop and think practically about this issue, it is also clear that by far the greatest number of passages in the Bible that describe encounters with unbelievers, and the communication of truth to them, come in the four Gospel accounts of the ministry of Jesus. This is not surprising, of course, for Jesus repeatedly declares that he has come into the world to save sinners.

LEARNING FROM JESUS: LESSONS FOR EVANGELISM

The approach of this book will be to look at a series of passages in the Gospels. Our goal will be to learn from Jesus as he reached out to those he came into this world to save. In each chapter we will study one

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story that recounts Jesus' meeting with someone who is not a believer, or some group of those who have no faith in him. In some of these encounters we will see people coming to faith in Jesus; in others we read of no conversion taking place—at least at that time. As we study each story, we will seek to discover some of the principles present both in Jesus' life and in his words that shape the way he meets and talks with people, and we will seek to draw some lessons for our own lives and for our communication of the gospel.

One final point I wish to make in this introduction is this: it has been a great joy to me to undertake this study. My prayer is that these studies will be a joy and a blessing to you the reader, and that the Lord will take pleasure in this little book and be pleased to use it for the extension of his kingdom.

They went each to his own house, but Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. Early in the morning he came again to the temple. All the people came to him, and he sat down and taught them. The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery, and placing her in the midst they said to him, "Teacher, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery. Now in the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. So what do you say?" This they said to test him, that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. And as they continued to ask him, he stood up and said to them, "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her." And once more he bent down and wrote on the ground. But when they heard it, they went away one by one, beginning with the older ones, and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. Jesus stood up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" She said, "No one, Lord." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more."

JOHN 7:53-8:11

CAUGHT IN THE ACT

When we read John's Gospel we see into the inner being of Jesus. John is the beloved disciple, the one who is close to Jesus' heart, and so we hear from him more of Jesus' personal reflections than we find in the other Gospels.

JOHN'S KNOWLEDGE OF JESUS

Because of John's intimacy with Jesus, we have a privileged window into the way Jesus thought about his calling in this world and about his relationship with the Father. It is in John that we read these words:

I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father. (John 14:31)

Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise. For the Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing. (John 5:19–20)

C. S. Lewis comments on this second passage, that when we read these words, we can imagine Jesus as a child in the carpenter's shop watching everything that Joseph was doing, and so learning by imitation.¹ All children learn to do many things by watching their mother or their father and then imitating their actions. Just so with Jesus and his heavenly Father—in everything he does he desires to please his Father and to imitate him, not only in his actions, but also in his words and manner of speech:

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For I have not spoken on my own authority, but the Father who sent me has himself given me a commandment—what to say and what to speak. And I know that his commandment is eternal life. What I say, therefore, I say as the Father had told me. (John 12:49–50; the NIV has “what to say and how to say it” rather than “what to say and what to speak.”)

As we think about Jesus meeting with people, this means that in every encounter he had, he did exactly what the Father wanted him to do. His actions, his attitude of heart, his words and the manner in which he expressed them were always precisely what the Father desired of him. How different we are! So often in our encounters with people we are reluctant to put ourselves out; we have self-centered and judgmental attitudes of heart; our actions do not always show love; our words are inadequate or confusing, too many or too few, problematic in all kinds of ways. We need to learn at Jesus’ feet, and make it our daily longing that we might “do as the Father wishes us to do” and “speak only the words that the Father wishes us to speak.” We can ask the Lord to help us in this, that our lives in the world, as well as our actions, words, and attitudes of heart, may be as he desires for us. In addition, we can look at how Jesus related to people and the words he spoke and seek to learn some lessons for our own encounters with people as we go about our daily lives—for in Jesus’ life and words we learn what pleases the Father.

IS THIS STORY TRULY SCRIPTURE?

This brings us to our first passage. Before reading this account of Jesus meeting the woman caught in adultery, we need to think about whether it is appropriate to regard this story as part of the biblical text. Despite the doubts about its authenticity, it is generally accepted by the church as being part of God’s Word—which is why we find it in all our Bibles, even if it often is set in parentheses with comments and explanations in the footnotes.

The story and the words used to tell it carry the ring of a true encounter between Jesus and a person whose life is a moral disaster. It is interesting that in some early manuscripts it appears after the

Caught in the Act

final words of John's Gospel, at the end of chapter 21. John tells us that Jesus did many other things; and that not everything he did was written down (John 21:25). It may be, therefore, that this story is one of those many additional events in Jesus' life that took place, and here is an example of such an incident set down for us.

In some early manuscripts this story is included at the end of Luke 21, after we read these words:

Early in the morning all the people came to him [Jesus] in the temple to hear him. (Luke 21:38)

This is a suitable setting for the account of Jesus' meeting with the woman as it gives us another example of Jesus' teaching in the temple courts. Some of the language, as we shall see later, is more typical of Luke's terminology than it is of John's. Wherever this story should be put, there is very substantial manuscript evidence for its authenticity, and it has many elements in it that are similar to other encounters between Jesus and "sinners." We need have no doubts about the wisdom or appropriateness of reading this passage or of teaching on it as a genuine part of Scripture.

WHO WAS THIS WOMAN?

We know nothing about this woman except her adultery. Whether she was the married person, or whether it is the man she was found having sex with who was married, we are not told, but for her sin to be adultery, rather than fornication, we must assume that at least one of them was married. We must also assume that she is a Jewish woman, as it is the religious authorities ("the scribes and the Pharisees") who bring her to Jesus—they would not have brought a Gentile to him, for they would have had no authority over her. ("The scribes and the Pharisees" is Luke's usual term for the religious leaders and an expression that John never uses in this form. John usually refers simply to "the Pharisees" or sometimes "the chief priests and the Pharisees.") The location is the temple where Jesus is teaching the people—as he does on so many occasions. The events described for us are taking

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place at the heart of the religious establishment, and in front of a sizable crowd. The Pharisees and scribes (or teachers of the law) have chosen their moment well.

TESTING JESUS

The text tells us that Jesus is being tested by the religious leaders. They come to him with a problem, calling Jesus “Teacher.” We must assume some sarcasm in their use of the title “Teacher,” for it is clear that they do not approve of much that he is teaching. They regard Jesus as someone who does not have the appropriate accreditation to set himself up as a teacher of the people. Appropriate accreditation in their eyes requires education under one of their own respected rabbis, and then their approval. Jesus has sidestepped this formal training, and has no desire to seek their approval. Consequently, the religious leaders are always on the lookout to find means of discrediting him in the eyes of the people, for the people flock to his teaching, and this popularity galls them.

We need to think about their motivation in bringing this woman before Jesus. We should notice that it is the woman they bring and not the couple together—since adultery, of course, takes two people. They must know who the man is, on this occasion, since the woman has been caught in the act, but they choose the one who is physically weaker, the one whom they can more easily intimidate, the one they can more readily accuse and denounce. Such people are always guilty of blaming women for the problems of adultery and prostitution, rather than recognizing that, far more frequently, it is men who are the initiators in such situations.

It is evident that these religious leaders have no concern for her at all. Concern for one’s students ought to be a central motivation for any teacher of God’s Word; but her well-being does not appear to have entered their minds. It is clearly their intention that this confrontation with Jesus should take place in the most public setting imaginable. Try to picture yourself being dragged like this—presumably half-clothed from bed—through the streets before crowds of onlookers, and then