

Saving encounters

Jim Loepp Thiessen

We had prayed and toiled for a year to get our new church off the ground. On a frosty January night, at the end of our first worship service, I was shaking hands with those who had come. A greeter brought a woman in her late twenties to me. Through her tears she told me, “I grew up in the church but threw it all away as a teenager. I married a nonbeliever. I decided to come to The Gathering after receiving information in the mail. I realized during the service that I need to turn my life back over to Jesus.”

I had not expected to witness such transformation on our first evening of worship! I prayed with Amy, though the prayer was really hers as she gave voice to an impulse long ignored. She and her two young children now faithfully attend our new church; she sings in the worship band and coordinates childcare. The experience of her conversion was heartwarming, and it made all we had done to prepare for that night seem well worth our investment.

But Amy is not typical of the people I have seen find salvation. Most of the stories related here come from my experience of leading an Alpha course for the past seven years. In this introduction to Christian faith, a small group gathers for ten evenings that include a meal or dessert together. The leader functions more as facilitator than teacher. A retreat in the middle of the course focuses on teaching about the Holy Spirit. The videos that are part of the course are led by Nicky Gumbel, a lawyer turned pastor of an Anglican church in central London. Alpha is a tool—only a tool—that opens a safe place for conversation about faith. It creates a nonjudgmental environment to which people can bring the messiness of their lives and their honest questions.

Those who have no experience of serfdom have trouble understanding the concept of *Lord*. I talk about the *leadership* of Jesus, though that language has limitations, too. The people with whom I walk offer their own pictures of coming to Jesus. “I never

realized it was that simple,” one woman responded after comprehending that the gospel is not about adhering to rules, jumping through hoops, or making things right with an angry God. Salvation is a gift received; in grace we live our response to that gift. Another woman, having grown up in what she describes as a traditional, rule-bound faith observed, “Slowly the layers are being peeled back.”

So how does salvation—healing, wholeness, redemption—happen for people today? I have noticed some patterns as I’ve accompanied many people along this path.

Salvation comes because of prayer

I believe our churches need to be charismatic in the best sense of the word: responsive to the movement of the Holy Spirit. Post-modern people are more likely to ask about Christian faith, Does it work? than Is it true? One woman said being prayed for marked a turning point for her. The Holy Spirit led me to intercede for her in certain ways, and the prayer spoke into her life. She told

Seekers may be willing to put up with the trappings of our tradition if they encounter meaningful community among us. But it’s up to us to make our worship relevant to those who are searching.

me, “I woke up through the night after that evening [of prayer], and the next morning felt like I was ready to move on with my life.” Salvation’s work of healing had begun.

Recently this woman had a deep experience of the Spirit in her life and has become passionate about her faith. She writes that “after an evening of group discussion, singing and prayer, I encountered the Holy Spirit during the night, alone in the darkness, as I prayed for what seemed like hours, and wept, and confessed, and raised my arms toward the

Lord.... Well, I can hardly put in print the immediate sense of cleansing, relief, and joy that washed over me at that moment!”

The last several groups I have led included people who were distrustful, cynical, or turned off by what they have seen and experienced in the church. For these folks, healing prayer was a highlight of the course. By the last weeks of the Alpha journey, the participants have gotten to know each other, and those who are cynical or distrustful have—if they have stuck with the course—journeyed along the path to a place of hesitant openness.

Many have never been prayed for before, certainly not by a whole group of people. We invite the Spirit to lead our praying, and God gives wisdom about how to pray for those entrusted to us. A number of people have had significant encounters with God on the Alpha retreat, during which we invite them, if they so desire, to pray to be filled with the Holy Spirit.

Salvation happens slowly

People who come to Jesus may, like Amy, make that decision quickly, but often the process unfolds slowly. It happens gradually, because people in our culture often belong before they believe. It takes time, because they may have to work through a host of concerns that arise from their experience of Christianity. Some have to sort through issues around legalism. Some wonder, What about the preachers on TV, or the leaders who claim to be Christians and yet do things that seem hypocritical or at odds with the love of Christ?

Last week I listened as a woman exploring faith questions wrestled with the fact that George Bush calls himself a Christian and yet is responsible for the death of many Iraqis. After weeks of considering faith questions, she said, “I think I’m finally ready to come and explore your church.” This past Sunday she decided that enough of her hesitations had been addressed, and she chose to turn her life over to Jesus.

Some people struggle with issues related to the church’s role in history—the crusades, for example, or the centuries of Christian anti-Semitism. I find myself repenting on behalf of the church, and I have found that it releases something in people. With a Jewish woman who is exploring faith in Jesus, I recently expressed my regret and sorrow about the way Christians have treated Jews, and her tone changed. Whatever else is in store for her, she has let go of some of her stereotypes of Christians.

Salvation happens because of relationships

I never try to convince people that they need salvation. God has always done that for me. I’ve never told people they are sinners in need of God’s grace, though they have heard that in the Alpha course teachings, and they sometimes come to that realization through prayer.

People who come to Jesus may make that decision quickly, but often the process unfolds slowly. It happens gradually, because people in our culture often belong before they believe.

Several years ago, I was convinced that one man in an Alpha group was making choices about substance abuse that were harming his family. After the evening that focuses on the Holy Spirit, he came to that conclusion on his own. In his view, God had revealed his error to him, and he experienced deep remorse. Had I told him, he probably would have become defensive.

In my experience, people don't usually come into a relationship with Jesus because they are convinced of their sin but because they see something in the reign of God that makes sense of their longings and breathes clarity into their lives. They yearn for the Jesus they hear about and have met through others in their small group. We see God at work in their lives, helping them come to terms with their past. They experience salvation through having the eyes of their hearts opened and through love they experience from others. In the end, the Jesus way is incarnational. God is revealed among us as followers of Jesus live with integrity and passion; such lives are the best thing we have going to point people toward the God we serve.

Salvation is a question of arrows, not boxes

Lining up with the leadership of Jesus isn't a matter of jumping into a box. Being a disciple of Jesus takes you on a journey that includes floundering, stumbling, moving ahead, stepping back. Sooner or later, people decide for or against living under the guidance of Jesus, but often that decision is realized and enacted over time. Innovative Christian thinker Brian McLaren observes that salvation is less like signing a contract and more like learning a language. It is not about crossing one big line but about moving across a series of lines, as we choose to move toward the overall leadership of Jesus in our lives. If our lives are arrows pointing toward or away from God, or somewhere in between, then lining up our lives with the leadership of Jesus is a process of redirecting those arrows, sometimes quickly, sometimes slowly.

When people choose to take a step closer to Jesus, I see lights go on in their eyes. An openness to the spiritual world becomes

evident. One man who was completely unfamiliar with the gospel—"I have only been to church for weddings"—came to our Alpha course. During the course, he made a commitment to follow Jesus. "I'm telling everyone who will listen that I'm a Christian," he enthused. I asked him if there was a turning point in his journey. He said there were several; the first big one happened when he was told by the small group leader that God had a plan for his life. This man, who had suffered much, was completely awed by the thought that the creator of the universe has a plan for his life. What for Christians is a cliché—God has a plan for your life—became a point of entrance for this man.

In times past, people were expected to believe first, then behave fittingly, and belonging came as a final step in the journey. Now people often belong first, find their identity in the commu-

People don't usually come into a relationship with Jesus because they are convinced of their sin but because they see something in the reign of God that makes sense of their longings and breathes clarity into their lives.

nity of God's people, then start behaving as suits those living the Jesus way. Believing is often the last step on the journey. Often we have asked people to get their beliefs right first, when what we need to do is find ways to help them get connected with the body of Christ. As they begin to belong in that circle, the Spirit of Jesus leads them closer to him.

Making our congregations more inviting

We need to create safe places, such as small groups, where people can encounter the Jesus story and ask any questions they need to ask.

Even before people engage in such exploration, they need places where they can simply make connections and build relationships with others in the body of Christ.

Our ten-week Alpha course introduction to Christian faith is not particularly postmodern in its approach, but it does provide a safe place to explore issues of faith, allowing people to ask whatever is on their hearts, and inviting them to contribute. These times of exploration are profoundly spiritual. They are led by people filled with the Spirit of Jesus, who believe that Jesus is alive today, and who are in tune with the Spirit yet open to whatever participants bring. Often the leaders are themselves new believers.

The approach of the apostle Paul, in his conversation with the Athenians on Mars Hill (Acts 17:16-34), is the spirit we need to adopt as we engage our culture with the good news. Paul, a Pharisee, laid aside his tradition in order to speak with these Greeks about the Jesus story, in their language, on their terms.

The people who come to explore faith have often dabbled in a

I'm not trying to make people into Mennonites; I'm trying to invite them into a relationship with the leader of Menno's life, Jesus Christ. I try to embody the values of Anabaptism in my character, words, and way of life.

host of spiritualities. Like Paul, we need to set aside cultural pieces that may be obstacles to their quest. I'm not trying to make people into Mennonites; I'm trying to invite them into a relationship with the leader of Menno's life, Jesus Christ. I don't start with denominational distinctives. I try to embody the values of Anabaptism in my character, words, and way of life.

We need to see our worship and other activities as they would be seen by those who have not heard the story. Our worship is often faithful to tradition but incomprehensible to

those who are not woven into that tradition. I have wandered into many Mennonite services and thought, "I know this is meaningful to you, but I would not bring someone here who is unfamiliar with this tradition." The way we use the Bible often implicitly says, "Here is a story you all know," and leaders assume that those assembled have a shared base of knowledge. The language and style of our worship music—the way we do church—communicates that this party is for insiders, not for those who do not yet know the story.

The claim God has on my life is reflected in the words of Isaiah 49:6: "It is too small a thing that you should shepherd my people.... I have called you as a light to the Gentiles." Seekers may be willing to put up with all the trappings of our tradition if they encounter meaningful community among us rather than a clubhouse for the likeminded. But it's up to us as leaders to make our worship relevant to those who are searching. The apostle Paul spoke his message in a way outsiders could understand, quoting the pagan poets of their day and weaving God into their story. He was deeply distressed by their idols, yet he moved to the center of that idolatry to tap the deep spiritual longings of these Greek

listeners; “I see that you are very religious in every way,” he told them.

Because people in our society learn visually, I draw on aids such as movie clips to illustrate what I’m speaking about. How to do so appropriately and effectively is a separate discussion. I don’t use this approach to be trendy or cute but because media is a language people understand, and I’m dying for them to hear the gospel in a way they comprehend. I always find that a teachable moment follows the showing of a clip. When those searching see me bridging gaps between my world and theirs, the effort speaks volumes to them.

Three times in the past two weeks I have witnessed as people have come into a living relationship with Jesus. Watching the joy on their faces and seeing the change in their lives is a thrill. I wish every follower of Jesus could experience the delight of looking on as people encounter the living presence of Jesus, and of walking with them as they grow in discipleship.

About the author

Jim Loepp Thiessen is pastor of The Gathering Church (www.thegatheringsite.ca), a new congregation in Kitchener, Ontario. Writing the stories in this article served as a reminder to him of the ways God has faithfully provided manna—one day at a time—in this adventure in church planting.