

You Can't Convert Anybody—Let the Holy Spirit Do His Work

When I visited Egypt a few years ago, a pastor from a church in Cairo told me about an outreach he had organized in a rural community. Medical professionals from his church set up a clinic in a village and advertised that they would be providing free care. When the doctors and nurses arrived at the location, residents were already lined up for the complimentary consultations.

When a nurse asked the first visitor to explain her medical problem, she said she did not have an ailment. “The woman told us: ‘I had a dream,’ the pastor explained. “‘I dreamed about Jesus Christ. And because I knew you were Christians, I have come to learn more.’”

This same conversation was repeated throughout the day, the pastor said. Many people came to the clinic not because they needed health care, but because they had had dreams about Jesus. One man even said Jesus appeared to him in his home. The people in this village were Muslims, and no one had ever shared the gospel with them. But the dreams filled them with spiritual curiosity.

We shouldn't be surprised to hear that God is moving like this. Jesus told us the Holy Spirit is actively involved in the lives of unbelievers.

Jesus described this work of the Spirit in John 16:8-11 (NASB 1995):

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And He, when (the Holy Spirit) comes, will convict the world

concerning sin, and righteousness, and judgment; concerning sin, because they do not believe in Me; and concerning righteousness, because I go to the Father, and you no longer behold Me; and concerning judgment, because the ruler of this world has been judged.

We tend to think the Spirit's work is limited to the church, but that's a fallacy. The Holy Spirit is God, and He wants all people to come to the knowledge of the truth. And even though Jesus commissioned us to preach the gospel, we won't see results without the Spirit's help. Here are three ways the Holy Spirit works with unbelievers in the world:

– **He draws them.** When Paul preached in Philippi, a woman named Lydia was saved. Acts 16:14b says, “the Lord opened her heart to respond to the things spoken by Paul.” Lydia became the first convert to Christ in Europe. This would never have happened if the Spirit had not been involved in the process.

The Holy Spirit is the giver of life. When we preach the gospel, the seed of the Word is planted. But the Spirit causes the growth and enables the precious seed to take root. He opens the eyes of the blind and reveals Jesus to those who live in darkness.

Never forget this when you share Jesus with someone. Your job is to preach, and to show Christ's love in words and actions. We are co-laborers with God. We do our part and He does His. But we don't have the power to open a person's heart or to convert them. The Holy Spirit does the heavy lifting. Jesus told us, “No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent me draws him” (John 6:44a).

– **He convicts them.** When Peter preached the gospel to a crowd in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost, about 3,000 people were converted at once. Acts 2:37 says when they heard the message, “they were pierced to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, ‘Brethren, what shall we do?’” The

phrase “pierced to the heart” can also be translated “wounded in conscience.”

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Again, this is the work of the Spirit. We can't convict people. I've heard countless testimonies from people who said that before they made the decision to believe in Jesus, they felt continually reminded of their sin—as if God were hunting them down. British theologian John Stott, in his 2003 book “Why I Am a Christian,” said his conversion was not due to the influence of any person but because he was pursued by “the hound of heaven”—Jesus Christ Himself.

People who are under conviction may run for a while. They may feel miserable because they are constantly reminded of their sin and shame. But if they yield to the Spirit's relentless, loving aggression, they will be transformed.

– **He confronts them.** Some people resist the wooing of the Holy Spirit, and they become agitated and angry. When Stephen preached to a group of Jews in Jerusalem, some of them rejected the message and erupted in violence. Acts 7:54 says, “And when they heard this, they were cut to the quick, and they *began* gnashing their teeth at him.” They knew deep in their hearts that the message was from God, but the conviction struck a nerve. Their reaction was to kill the messenger.

We see so much anger today in people who hate Christianity. Some of them spew profanity, make threats and even become violent when they meet a Christian. Secularists and atheists launch tirades on social media or cut ties with family, simply because they can't handle the uncomfortable reminder that there is a holy God in heaven who calls sinners to repent.

Don't get mad if a non-Christian scolds or curses you. They are under the conviction of the Holy Spirit. Love them, bless them and pray that they will not be able to escape God's merciful pursuit.

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