

THE SECRET LIFE OF CHRISTIANS

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Galatians 1: 3 – 10; 2 Corinthians 5: 16 – 20

We are not supposed to tell secrets, are we? If someone trusts us with something, we're to keep their trust. But what if you find out something that is *good* news? What if you have information that will *help other people*? I've learned something over the years that could actually be the key to all happiness in this life. Wanna hear it? [*time with the kids*]

What just happened? I had something wonderful to share, something helpful and encouraging for everyone, but I treated it like a secret. So it became distorted, and turned into a weird rumour, and ultimately, nonsense. A beautiful truth, ruined by being kept in the dark, and it was neither given nor received with any sense of the power or the peace of Christ. I hope and pray that we would be far more open in our daily lives about our life in Christ, and what He means to us. Because that's evangelism, pure and simple → a transparent, consistent, confident outward expression of our faith in, and relationship with, Jesus and our Creator God through our words and actions.

Is that enough? Is our quiet evangelism in personal circles reaching out far enough with the Good News of Christ's redemptive grace & hope? Is that what Paul meant by 'being ambassadors' for Christ?

A dear friend, Anne, now the Presbyterian minister in Harvey, N.B, worked her way through Knox College at the Sear's jewelry counter in the Eaton Centre, downtown Toronto. One day – this was over 15 years ago - a 40-something woman was looking for a gift for her preteen niece celebrating her first Communion. Anne showed her a variety of beautiful crosses, but the woman wasn't satisfied. Finally she said, "Well, these are all nice, but do you have any crosses with the little man on it?". "The little man". How did this happen? How could Jesus not be recognized for Who He is? How could the person of Jesus become so misunderstood, or worse, nonexistent for some people?

This is not a recent development; the demise of the Christian Church in Canada did not just sneak up on us and catch us by surprise. Until the early 80's, we said the Lord's Prayer every morning in school and until the early 90's, Sunday was an actual Sabbath day – no shopping, no movies showing, no hockey or soccer practices, just refreshment & time with family and friends. Because faith mattered at every level and we shared a general understanding of, and respect for, the need for prayer and Sabbath time in our society. There wasn't much actual need for evangelism when I was a little person because, who would you tell? Everyone went to church! But I fear we got lazy; we dangerously assumed that the Christian Church would always be strong, always be supported by the majority, and our faithful culture & habits would never be outlawed. While our comfortable assumptions stood firm, PCC membership dropped 36% in the 1990's, the biggest decrease of any denomination in Canada.

Why? We have in our hearts and minds the single greatest truth ever known to humankind – Jesus Lives!! And because He lives, we too shall live, redeemed and loved for all time!! These statistics are NOT all gloom & doom, depending on one's perspective. We actually live in the modern mission field. Non-Christians are everywhere and the opportunities for meaningful evangelism are virtually endless! So let's go, right now! Bring a Bible and let's get out there! What's holding us back? What stops us from sharing the BEST news that anyone will ever hear? We've been talking about evangelism for the past three Sundays and we're going to keep talking about it today, and you're stuck with me again next week, until we feel more confident

about answering Paul's challenge to be "ambassadors for Christ", to work to please God above all, rather than being merely popular with the neighbours.

Admittedly for some of us, the very word 'evangelism' causes a sudden fascination with our feet and a nasty outbreak of hives. You may have a deep & abiding faith, a fervent love for Christ, and a rock solid theological understanding of the nature of God and His perfect absolute grace. But you want me to tell people about it? You want me to discuss Jesus & God, out loud, in public? What if someone hears me?!

Some of us are very good at it, in fact, are divinely gifted in evangelism and speak with ease about their faith to anyone, at anytime, anywhere. For those folks, it comes naturally and they can't fathom why the rest of us hesitate. May I suggest that our greatest obstacle to effective evangelism is fear! We need to name it if we're ever going to face it.

We fear rejection, humiliation, maybe even hatred for our beliefs; perhaps we're anxious about our own ability to explain the Gospel. We fear oppositional challenges that we may not be able to answer & fear appearing foolish, duped by an ancient myth, others may say. Maybe we fear the consequences, social or career-related, if others start to see us as 'religious' instead of one of the gang, just like them, but now they have to start watching their language around us.

So sometimes, it's just simpler to live the secret life of Christians: attend on Sundays, volunteer, get involved with a program or small group, but maybe not talk too much about that life outside of church circles. It just doesn't come up. Or maybe there's never a right time to bring up the topic of faith, and we're not really sure how the other person will take it. So we may decide it's easier not to rock that boat and disturb an established dynamic at school, at work, with the neighbours or the book club or the golf buddies. Our world has an impression of us, an understanding of who we are and what they can expect of us, and it's not easy or comfortable to break out of that casing around us.

Even after over 3 years of seminary, when I was being ordained back in 1999, my family & closest friends still had trouble understanding my sense of call and reconciling the changes that were happening in me with the person they'd known for so long. Even today, most of them refer to me as "The Irreverent Swatridge"!

Are we living a secret life as Christians? I've officiated at funerals for long term church members whose friends were stunned to hear their loved one was the Chair of the Board at church, or an Elder, or taught Sunday School, because what happened at church, stayed at church. May that never be our slogan! Do your friends and family realize the depth of your faith, the fire in your soul, the importance of Christ in your life? If so, awesome – you can coach the rest of us! And if not, why not? If we're not excited about the Gospel, about our relationship with Jesus, why would anyone else want to know Him? Are we sharing our faith stories with one another, honing our skills and getting more comfortable with our own stories so we can share with non-believers? If we don't talk about all we love about this church, about this faith family, about the joy and meaning we find in Bible studies and programs and breakfasts and bazaars, why would anyone else ever want to come here? Are we as open & visible, individually and as a congregation, as we could and should be for sharing our faith and fellowship? No, it is not easy to engage indifferent, even suspicious folks in the stories of Christ.

But if we don't speak up and speak out, then ignorance abounds and falsehoods will fill the void. Overcome the fear by knowing your Bible, asking questions of OPC leadership & staff, practising your story of faith or writing it out, and most important, **trust the Spirit** to bring you opportunity and guide your words. The world can be harsh, even violent toward Christians, yet people need to hear about Jesus now more than ever. The need is far greater than our fear. Listen to the words of Mother Teresa, who knew what it was to go where she wasn't wanted at first, and to keep pleasing God, no matter the obstacles against her.