A Critical Look at “Friendship Evangelism”

It is common practice among evangelicals (and other similar movements) to use friendships as a means of evangelism. As appealing as it might sound to want to make accepting the gospel easier for people, the Christian message is, and will always be, a message of the cross. That is to say, a message of self-sacrifice and devotion. For many of his listeners, Jesus’ message was an offence. Some simply left him, saying “This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?” (John 6:60), others became abusive, even going as far as having him put to death.

And what was the reason for their rejection? Jesus’ assessment was that people love their own lives—that is, their own plans and aims and pleasures.

In contrast to Jesus’ message, friendship evangelism, by necessity, includes getting involved in the myriad of ways in which people “love their lives”. It means sharing their interests and taking part in their activities and distractions. If one does the same things they do, how is it possible to show them what losing one’s life means? If a believer lets themselves be swept away in the same torrent of water as those who don’t believe, how can they pull them out? Such a “gospel” might spare a believer from being persecuted, but it cannot save anyone.

Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world—the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does—comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives for ever. (1 John 2:15–17)[1]

In this article we take a look at the problems with friendship evangelism and contrast it with the approach of Jesus, Paul and the apostles towards preaching the gospel.

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Part I The Foundation for Evangelism

1 What Is the Message That Jesus Preached?

Before we think about how to evangelise, that is, how to help people understand salvation through Jesus, we first need to be clear on what that salvation actually means. There are many aspects that are crucial to salvation—from Jesus’ love shown in his life and death, his divinity and mediatorship and much more.

One aspect which has particular relevance to the issue of friendship evangelism is repentance and what kind of life and devotion Jesus called people to.

1.1 Repentance Means a Complete Change of Life

Repentance is the prerequisite for receiving God’s forgiveness, and means turning to him with sincere regret over the sinful way of life one has lived. We can see examples of this in the story about Zaccheus and the sinful woman:

All the people saw this and began to mutter, “He has gone to be the guest of a sinner.” But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, “Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.” Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.” (Luke 19:7–10)

Now one of the Pharisees invited Jesus to have dinner with him, so he went to the Pharisee’s house and reclined at the table. When a woman who had lived a sinful life in that town learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee’s house, she brought an alabaster jar of perfume, and as she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them. (Luke 7:36–38)

Jesus used many words and parables to show that real repentance means turning away from sin and doing God’s will—that is, turning from a self-willed life to a God-willed life:

“Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” Jesus replied: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.” (Matthew 22:36–39)
Then he said to them all: “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it. What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit their very self?” (Luke 9:23–25)

So we see that Jesus connected becoming a Christian with giving our whole life to him in such a way that we consciously strive to do what God wants and not to live for ourselves. This is a message that many find hard, and certainly not one with which you can attract many friends.

1.2 Repentance Comes by Understanding Sin in the Light of God’s Holiness

Repentance includes a complete change of attitude regarding the gravity of sin:

If your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell. (Matthew 5:29–30)

The Apostle Peter adds:

But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do, for it is written: “Be holy, because I am holy.” (1 Peter 1:15–16)

The good news of the gospel is a very joyful message, but it is also a very serious one. The way we communicate it to people should reflect this seriousness, so that they can understand that they are being called to stand before the one holy God, and that they need to repent.

When a person understands God’s holiness they will understand how deeply sinful their life is. This is the basis for repentance and for living a holy life. If methods of evangelism are used which do not reflect God’s holiness (for example, which treat sin, such as pleasure-seeking, lightly) then they cannot bear testimony about him or lead a person to reverent fear and the conviction of how much their sin separates them from God. Paul urges believers to give this testimony:

Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose. Do everything without grumbling or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation. Then you will shine among them like stars in the sky as you hold firmly to the word of life. And then I will be able to boast on the day of Christ that I did not run or labor in vain. (Philippians 2:12–16)

This attitude described here is what we mean when we talk of “reverent fear”: walking in awe of God, living carefully and consciously, choosing to do only what is truly good and holy. Such a life brings glory to God. It bears testimony to the strength he gives and how he transforms those who submit to him. This is the
witness that people need.

1.3 Following Jesus Means Turning Away from a Selfish and Worldly Way of Life

Today many people (including religious people) use a lot of time for themselves in a baffling variety of leisure activities and hobbies. So much unnecessary time, money and effort is spent on the self. By looking for fulfilment in such activities, people miss the joy that God wants to give and neglect the spiritual and practical needs of others.

Let’s compare this with Jesus’ example:
He loved the Father and people so much that he always directed his attention to how he can serve them. How deep must this wish to serve have been, when in the greatest pain while dying on the cross he spoke words of hope for the rebel beside him and made arrangements for the care of his mother (Luke 23:39-43, John 19:26-27)? He was simply doing what he had always done, namely, putting others first and forgetting himself.

We cannot find examples in the Bible of Jesus having sought his own pleasure or done things that didn’t serve spiritual aims. He lived entirely for others, turning to them in tireless devotion to teach them what it really means to live by faith. He saw their urgent need to know the Father.

It is this example that he calls us to follow. He describes this call in terms such as “hating/losing one’s life” or “dying” or “carrying the cross” or “loving just like he did” (John 12:25-26, John 15:9-17, John 13:34, Luke 14:25-33, ...).

The world asks: “What’s in it for me?”, “What makes me happy / feel good?”

A Christian asks: “How can I devote my life completely to God?”, “How can I love my brothers and sisters in faith, and help other people to find God’s love?”, “How can I grow in faith and reject the desires of this world?”

Some religious people go to great lengths to show that Christians are just like unbelievers in order to attract people to “the gospel”. How is this possible, when Jesus’ life was so utterly opposite to the world? How can this be called Christianity?

A sinner, who knows he is a sinner, is better off than a religious person who does not recognise his sin. Sadly, some who once turned away from worldly lives, in which they knew they were sinful, are cheated by religious groups into thinking that you can combine a worldly and Christian life. This is much harder to recognise and repent of because the worldliness is given a more or less “spiritual” coating (= justification).

We will look at a few common responses we hear from people when we speak with them about the difference between the attitude of Christians and that of unbelievers later in the section “Frequently Used Excuses”. Firstly however, we would like to continue with looking at the biblical example for evangelism in the life of Jesus and his followers....

2 How Did Jesus Communicate His Message to People?

Jesus’ encounter with the rich young man demonstrates very well how he called people:

As Jesus started on his way, a man ran up to him and fell on his knees before him.
“Good teacher”, he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” “Why do you call me good?” Jesus answered. “No one is good—except God alone. You know the
commandments: “You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, you shall not defraud, honor your father and mother.” “Teacher”, he declared, “all these I have kept since I was a boy.” Jesus looked at him and loved him. “One thing you lack”, he said. “Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.” At this the man’s face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth. Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!” The disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said again, “Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” (Mark 10:17–25)

Jesus knew that this man needed to hear God’s perfect standard in order to be saved. Although the man was not ready to repent, this was the greatest display of love that Jesus could show him. Jesus gave him the chance of his life to assess his sins and to devote himself to God by clearly and directly explaining what was missing in the man’s readiness to serve God. He did not try to win him over by appealing to his particular hobbies or interests. He got straight to the point, and when the man did not want to follow him, he did not run after him, or try to comfort him and make the way sound easier.

Likewise, we owe people this clarity about God’s standard if we want to preach the gospel to them.

The Samaritan woman at the well (John 4) also received a very direct calling. Jesus used the fact that she had come to draw water to start talking about himself (that he is the living water), and then touched on a very sensitive point in her life that hindered her from being able to receive this living water (she lived in adultery). Her reaction, however, was one of great amazement and joy. She saw the love and power of God in his words.

These examples show that the problem is not how quickly or directly we speak about the gospel with people. The attitude of the listener is what is decisive. The parable of the sower contains a description of four kinds of ground which represent the various reactions to hearing the gospel (Matthew 13:3–8 and 13:18–23). The seed which is sown is good, and the good soil receives it with joy, but the other kinds of ground (= people’s hearts) describe the hard-heartedness of many people towards God. Jesus shows that it is not God’s standard which is the obstacle to repentance, but their lack of openness.

Jesus was not afraid of “treading on toes”, that is, of offending people. This was not because he was arrogant or insensitive, but because he knew that people desperately needed to hear the truth. He showed his love by challenging them to the core to stand before God and devote their lives to him. Love means saying the truth, and not just being friendly, as here:

As they were walking along the road, a man said to him, “I will follow you wherever you go.” Jesus replied, “Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.” He said to another man, “Follow me.” But he replied, “Lord, first let me go and bury my father.” Jesus said to him, “Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God.” Still another said, “I will follow you, Lord; but first let me go back and say goodbye to my family.” Jesus replied, “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God.” (Luke 9:57–62)
Such strong words are not the exception in Jesus’ ministry. Even a brief look at the gospels reveals that the vast majority of his words included some kind of challenge to take on God’s perspective of life and the world. For more on this point, see our website topic “Love and Assessment”.

How is it possible to reconcile this direct manner of speaking, as in the example above, with the people-pleasing approach of friendship evangelism?

Of course, if you yourself do not live a holy life, you will not be able to preach God’s standard clearly to others. For many, the first step in assessing this matter of how to evangelise will first include the readiness to take a critical look at their own lives.

Living righteously and proclaiming the truth clearly will attract opposition, which in Jesus case led to his crucifixion. There can be no clearer testimony against a people-pleasing and compromised message. This message was continued by the disciples, as we shall look at in the next section.

3 The Apostles’ Evangelism

3.1 A Message That Brings Persecution

3.1.1 The Early Church

At Pentecost, Peter preached openly, finally even convicting the Jews of having crucified the Messiah.

“...Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah.” When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?” Peter replied, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.” With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.” Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day. (Acts 2:36–41)

It was the word of God—the testimony of God’s acting and salvation—that deeply touched the people’s hearts. They were not impressed by any outward appearances or some kind of show. Peter preached a clear, unadulterated message of God’s love and the call to repentance. The people who were willing to listen were shaken rather than offended, because they let God speak to them and convict them through Peter’s words.

Where people are not ready to let God speak to them, even the best techniques of persuasion will not move their hearts. Through such techniques, it is possible to move someone to become religious, but not to become a Christian (here we refer to “religious” in the sense of adapting to religious life without living in true obedience to God). When the truth is preached plainly, such people will be offended by the claim that God makes on their lives through the gospel. This is unavoidable.

In the beginning, the message of the gospel led to Christians being persecuted. Nevertheless, the Apostles did not hold back from preaching what they knew was a great offense to many.
The priests and the captain of the temple guard and the Sadducees came up to Peter and John while they were speaking to the people. They were greatly disturbed because the apostles were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead. They seized Peter and John, and because it was evening, they put them in jail until the next day. (Acts 4:1–3)

The churches were not loved by everyone. As they followed Jesus’ example and spoke the word of God boldly, they too faced much persecution.

Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you stood your ground in a great contest in the face of suffering. Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution; at other times you stood side by side with those who were so treated. You sympathised with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions. (Heb 10:32–34)

It was just as Jesus had promised—the disciples were not above their master, and were persecuted just as he had been (John 15:20).

(For other examples, see: Acts 5:17–42, Acts 6:8–8:3)

3.1.2 Paul—No Compromises

Paul spoke the word boldly by the power of the spirit wherever he went. Some accepted the word joyfully, but others immediately took offense and persecuted him, even trying to kill him. This did not influence him, and in each town he continued to preach openly and directly until he was forced to move on.

Now at Iconium they entered together into the Jewish synagogue and spoke in such a way that a great number of both Jews and Greeks believed. But the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers. So they remained for a long time, speaking boldly for the Lord, who bore witness to the word of his grace, granting signs and wonders to be done by their hands. But the people of the city were divided; some sided with the Jews and some with the apostles. When an attempt was made by both Gentiles and Jews, with their rulers, to mistreat them and to stone them, they learned of it and fled to Lystra and Derbe, cities of Lycaonia, and to the surrounding country, and there they continued to preach the gospel. (Acts 14:1–7, ESV)

This pattern repeated throughout Paul’s journeys. He did not take an easier way by trying to carefully make friends with the Jews and win them over through taking part in their lives. When he entered a town, he immediately entered the synagogue and spoke openly about Jesus, including his crucifixion, which was an especially difficult point for Jews to accept (see Acts 13:14–43).

Just as Jesus commanded, Paul loved all people. His being rejected was not a result of bad behaviour but was rather a consequence of simply having loved people by speaking the truth. He was ready to bear rejection for the sake of the truth—ready to be an “outsider”.
He prophesied from personal experience:

In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.
(2 Timothy 3:12)

3.2 What Did Paul Himself Say About How He Evangelised?

Therefore, since through God’s mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart. Rather, we have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to every man’s conscience in the sight of God. And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake. For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness”, made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. (2 Corinthians 4:1–6)

Like Jesus, Paul also preached an uncompromising message. He was very concerned that people be led to true repentance and to the person of Christ, not to himself. He did not use methods to lure people to the gospel but simply let the word of God touch their hearts, so that they could experience God’s power in their lives. He trusted that although many found this message hard, those who really longed for peace with God would understand it.

And so it was with me, brothers and sisters. When I came to you, I did not come with eloquence or human wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. I came to you in weakness with great fear and trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit’s power, so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God’s power.
(1 Corinthians 2:1–5)

The addressees of this letter were the Christians in Corinth. Problems had arisen in which some of the Christians had shown appreciation for skilled speakers—an art-form which was highly honoured in Greek society. Rather than trying to adapt to their tastes in his preaching and thus spark their interest, Paul admonishes them for their worldly assessments. In the passage above he explains that he came to them sincerely, consciously choosing plain, simple speech. In this way the gospel itself should “speak” to them, rather than any attractive “packaging” (i.e. nice rhetoric).

But thanks be to God, who always leads us as captives in Christ’s triumphal procession and uses us to spread the aroma of the knowledge of him everywhere. For we are to God the pleasing aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are an aroma that brings death; to the other, an aroma that brings life. And who is equal to such a task? Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word
of God for profit. On the contrary, in Christ we speak before God with sincerity, as those sent from God. (2 Corinthians 2:14-17)

The call given to people is the same, but the way people react to it differs—not essentially because of the outward circumstances or the way we approach people, but because of their own hearts.

Paul accepted the fact that many people would take offense at the gospel. For the sake of those who were thirsty for truth he preached it without compromise, in the clearest words possible. He knew that this alone can lead people to true repentance and a whole-hearted decision for Jesus.

Above all, it was through their tireless devotion, living out the message, that Paul and his co-workers gave testimony about Jesus:

You know, brothers and sisters, that our visit to you was not without results. We had previously suffered and been treated outrageously in Philippi, as you know, but with the help of our God we dared to tell you his gospel in the face of strong opposition. For the appeal we make does not spring from error or impure motives, nor are we trying to trick you. On the contrary, we speak as those approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel. We are not trying to please people but God, who tests our hearts. You know we never used flattery, nor did we put on a mask to cover up greed—God is our witness. We were not looking for praise from people, not from you or anyone else, even though as apostles of Christ we could have asserted our authority. Instead, we were like young children among you. Just as a nursing mother cares for her children, so we cared for you. Because we loved you so much, we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well. Surely you remember, brothers and sisters, our toil and hardship; we worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone while we preached the gospel of God to you. You are witnesses, and so is God, of how holy, righteous and blameless we were among you who believed. For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory. (1 Thessalonians 2:1-12)

Anyone who knows how consuming parenthood is, will be able to understand well, what kind of commitment Paul describes here when he compares his care for these young disciples of Christ with that of a mother and father. Through his life, he embodied the essence of the message of Jesus, and challenged them to do the same, as expressed in the letter to the Corinthians:

Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ. (1 Corinthians 11:1)

4 How Should We Bear Witness?

Jesus established the Church as the greatest testimony of God’s acting to the world—through their love for one another, and the deep unity among them.
A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another. (John 13:34–35)

My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one—I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. (John 17:20–23)

By these statements, Jesus expressed the importance of the Church as a whole giving testimony. Christian unity and devotion cannot be practised alone. That is why Christians can best give testimony about the work of God in their lives when they are together, and together call people to life with him.

Jesus’ call to discipleship was embodied in the life of the early church—in the devotion of the believers to one another and in the deep unity they shared. Seeing their lives made it very simple for those seeking God to understand that living for God really means putting him first in everything and living a life of love and holiness. Through this testimony, people were able to understand the seriousness of God’s call and the reality of the command of Jesus “…and anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.” Matthew 10:38–39

Paul expressed that the Church is the fulfilment of God’s plan of salvation on earth:

...And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way. (Ephesians 1:22–23)

The following passage is a clear example of what happens when someone who is looking for God meets the Church:

So if the whole church comes together and everyone speaks in tongues, and inquirers or unbelievers come in, will they not say that you are out of your mind? But if an unbeliever or an inquirer comes in while everyone is prophesying, they are convicted of sin and are brought under judgment by all, as the secrets of their hearts are laid bare. So they will fall down and worship God, exclaiming, “God is really among you!” (1 Corinthians 14:23–25)

For more about Church see: “The Visible Church”, “The Unity of All Christians” and “Church structure—Offices or Tasks?”.

One problem with friendship evangelism is that the testimony of the individual is emphasised, rather than the testimony of the work of God in the Church. As Christians, we should not lead people to ourselves so that they are particularly impressed with our own person (not even our own “friendliness”) but to Christ. Many people build relationships where they make themselves especially “beloved” to one another and by doing so, they encourage others to attach themselves to their person. Such aims are not selfless and do not have God and the spiritual well-being of others at heart (for more on this question see “God Is Love” and “Love and Assessment“).
5 How Should We Not Bear Witness?

“I befriend people first, and speak with them about God later, when they trust me more, and can see my love for them.” or “I don’t start talking about God, but I wait for people to ask me why I do things differently.”

Such an approach sounds very appealing at first glance and to be sure, in our daily contact with people who do not believe, we are called to be good examples and to show love as far as it depends on us. If, however, we seek relationships with them beyond the necessary contact at work or school etc., we cross a border that exists between believers and unbelievers. This thought might not be so self-evident for everyone. In Part II, we will explain more on this point.

Part II Problems with Friendship Evangelism

6 Friendship Evangelism Is Dishonest

Nowhere in the New Testament can we read of Jesus approaching people like this: “So you’re not really interested in giving your life for God? Don’t worry, just come and join us for some fun…” (i.e. relaxing together, listening to music, playing sport or some other hobby). However, in the back of his mind he thinks: “…if they just come to the games night, I can get a chance to slip in a few words about the gospel.”

Jesus respected people’s wish not to live with God, and did not try to influence (manipulate) them, not even “for their own good” (i.e. that they might be saved). He knew it doesn’t work that way and that any other approach than a direct one is not honest. Appealing to people’s desires in order to influence them is sheer manipulation—just like any worldly marketing strategy which tries to push people into buying things they never really wanted. In this way people are treated as objects rather than individuals with a free will. In contrast to this, Christian love means taking people seriously in their beliefs and opinions, and not using deceitful tactics in order to “win them over”. Remember the example of Paul mentioned in 1 Corinthians 2:1–5.

Enticing people with things they like also gives a distorted picture of Christianity because it gives the impression that you can hold on to your life (your pleasures). Such an approach makes it seem as if there is little difference between the life of a believer and an unbeliever.

7 Friendship Evangelism Encourages a Worldly Lifestyle

The problem is that many religious people themselves see no problem in pursuing their pleasures while living with God. Through their lives (their words may sound different) they proclaim that faith is just like another hobby you can fit alongside your other worldly interests. Faith becomes something to be touched on every now and then, as one feels like it, rather than being something that consumes a Christian’s entire life.

Where the wish to give one’s life completely for God is missing, friendship evangelism provides a convenient excuse to continue sinning under the guise of remaining “relatable”, or “building a base” to talk about God with others. This approach is neither honest towards oneself, nor towards God or other people.

May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world
has been crucified to me, and I to the world. (Galatians 6:14)

I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. (Galatians 2:20)

Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me. (John 12:25–26)

When friendship evangelism is used to justify doing things that do not please God, there is practically no limit to what is possible for a Christian to do. Some take a slightly milder approach, only going as far as inviting unbelievers for a games evening at home...others take it as far as going to parties or to the disco (or still worse, holding a “Christian” disco) in the name of “evangelism”.

Some religious people even go to great lengths to prove to unbelievers: “I’m no different to you...I’m a fan of the same football team...I listen to the same music...I saw the same movie as you....”

This does not help people to repent because it hinders them in understanding God’s holiness and denies that many such activities are in themselves sinful.

John writes:

Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, love for the Father is not in them. For everything in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but whoever does the will of God lives forever. (1 John 2:15–17)

8 Christians Cannot Make Friends with the World

It is normal for Christians to seek God’s will in everything they do, as too, is the longing to view day to day occurrences with his eyes. This leads to fundamentally different perspectives on almost everything and to entirely different priorities and usage of time than for unbelievers. As a Christian strives to live a holy and godly life, they will be confronted with how incompatible their life is with that of unbelievers.

This is not a “problem” to be overcome by making compromises, but a natural, albeit painful, part of being “aliens and strangers” in the world that Christians must humbly accept (Hebrews 11:13, 1 Peter 2:11).

Jesus himself made no apologies for his choice of friends:

You are my friends if you do what I command. (John 15:14)

He did not try to be friends with everyone. He knew that those who reject his message live in opposition to God and that his path was an entirely different one to theirs.

These passages express the separation that exists between a believer and an unbeliever:
against God? Therefore, anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. Or do you think Scripture says without reason that he jealously longs for the spirit he has caused to dwell in us? (James 4:4–5)

Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. Because of these, the wrath of God is coming. You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived. (Colossians 3:1–7)

When Jesus sent the disciples out to preach the gospel he commanded them to separate from those who were not open for their message:

Whatever town or village you enter, search there for some worthy person and stay at their house until you leave. As you enter the home, give it your greeting. If the home is deserving, let your peace rest on it; if it is not, let your peace return to you. If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, leave that home or town and shake the dust off your feet. Truly I tell you, it will be more bearable for Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town. (Matthew 10:11–15)

Likewise, Paul expressed how impossible it is for believers and unbelievers to share in fellowship:

Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? Or what does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God. As God has said: “I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people.” Therefore, “Come out from them and be separate, says the Lord. Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you.” And, “I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty.” Therefore, since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God. (2 Corinthians 6:14–7:1)

Paul borrows this picture from the law: “Do not plough with an ox and a donkey yoked together” (Deuteronomy 22:10). To do so would make ploughing a straight line near impossible. Similarly, a believer wants to do things which bring glory to God, and an unbeliever does not. In spiritual matters they cannot work together, and everything in a Christian’s life is to be considered spiritually. There is no “free time” in which spiritual principles do not apply. Every situation is a service to God (“service” is not a Sunday morning meeting, see Romans 12:1–2).

The attitude of wanting to serve God cannot remain a theoretical wish, but necessarily leads to completely different activities and use of time to unbelievers. Apart from the daily responsibilities of work or school etc., we have to consider how we use our time and what the priorities are. Unbelievers often look for their own aims such as how to amuse themselves, but believers look at how Jesus lived and seek tasks that are
not for their own amusement, but which serve God’s kingdom—such as fellowship with other believers, or evangelism, reading the Bible, prayer etc.

The passage in 2 Corinthians 6:14 ff. is often wrongly limited to marriage or partnership.

The context of verse 14 contains no mention of marriage. Paul uses very strong expressions to show the opposition between the life of a believer and an unbeliever. They have no more agreement than Christ with idols! To exclude that this passage refers to friendships would be inconsistent with other passages in scripture that speak about separation (see Psalm 1, 1 Peter 4:3-5, Matthew 10:34-36, Matthew 18:15-18, James 4:4-6, Ephesians 5:3-7, 1 John 1:5-7). It would also be arbitrary to refer this only to marriage and not to friendships. If there is such a difference between believers and unbelievers, how can friendship be possible?

Paul did not mean, however, that Christians cannot co-operate with unbelievers at all, for example in the workplace or at school. At work, the tasks in themselves are not opposed to God, and a Christian can show a good example by working in a way which pleases God. In such contexts, it is important to be cooperative, helpful and considerate. Respect and submission to authorities is also biblical (Romans 13:1-7). We should only be careful not to compromise our faith. If Christians did not work in normal society, they would have to leave it entirely—which would be unbiblical (John 17:15).

A strong reason for many people to take part in things they know deep down are not pleasing to God is the fear of people’s reactions—the fear of losing friendships and being rejected. Looking for acceptance by unbelievers leads a person very far from God. Concerning this, Jeremiah wrote:

> This is what the Lord says: “Cursed is the one who trusts in man, who draws strength from mere flesh and whose heart turns away from the Lord. That person will be like a bush in the wastelands; they will not see prosperity when it comes. They will dwell in the parched places of the desert, in a salt land where no one lives. “But blessed is the one who trusts in the Lord, whose confidence is in him. They will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green. It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit.” (Jeremiah 17:5-8)


9 Friendship Evangelism Is Exclusive

9.1 Favouring Some and Not Others

Jesus loved everyone and was ready to give everything in order to lead them to a relationship with God. He did not want people to attach themselves to him personally.

> Then Jesus’ mother and brothers arrived. Standing outside, they sent someone in to call him. A crowd was sitting around him, and they told him, “Your mother and brothers are outside looking for you.” “Who are my mother and my brothers?” he asked. Then he looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does God’s will is my brother and sister and mother.” (Mark 3:31-35)
Jesus was open for everyone who wanted to know God. It was them to whom he devoted his time, and not the many who were not interested in hearing what he had to say.

Friendship evangelism on the other hand, leads to befriending a few people in order to “reach” them with the gospel. Often these relationships are built purely on personal preference (who it is that you like or find interesting, or where there is some common interest—just like people in the world). This kind of friendship is based on selfish motives rather than the selfless wish to serve whoever we can. Such relationships are also exclusive—some are preferred, others are not and remain alone.

Ask yourself: “Who is my real family? Who do I really have time for? Is God the aim of these relationships?”

By focusing on a few unbelieving friends, who may never decide to follow Christ, many are passed by who may well be searching for God at this point in time. This is not love. We should be actively open for everyone who is looking for God right now.

He said to another man, “Follow me.” But he replied, “Lord, first let me go and bury my father.” Jesus said to him, “Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God.” (Luke 9:59–60)

Jesus calls the man to leave others to bury his father so that he can preach the good news to people who are searching for God. He says that those who are spiritually “dead” (i.e. who do not want to live with God) can take care of this task. This is of course not a rule against burying someone. It does, however, show that Jesus was ready to cut through social norms in order to put the spiritual priorities first, even if it meant offending others. If he considered an occasion such as a burial so secondary, that the unbelievers should deal with it themselves, then how much less would he have spent vast amounts of time doing unnecessary things with them?

So we see that Jesus did not consider it right to spend many months and years “patiently” trying to draw people to himself. Through his words the urgency and priority of the matter was made clear and people were faced with the decision to accept or reject God’s call. Having chosen God, they too should follow their master in showing others what it means to put service in God’s kingdom first in their lives.

True friendships are built not on human preference, but on the common wish to serve God. Only then, when the focus is not pleasing each other, but pleasing God, can deep, free, selfless relationships develop. Such relationships are a testimony to the world of the love that God works in those who follow him (see John 13:34).

People have many reasons for choosing who their friends are—often based on common interests, human sympathies, personal preferences or advantages…and other such aims, which are largely selfish. Christians, on the other hand, are called to love everyone, without bias. This love means inviting them to know God and his love. If people reject this love, then we have to accept that we cannot help them.

9.2 Clinging to People Endangers Spiritual Life

For many, the wish that loved ones will be saved is a great hindrance to clearly assessing their lack of openness. This, in turn, leads to making compromises concerning matters of obedience to God because of the expectations of friends and relatives, and to losing the clear spiritual assessment of how important it is to look for God’s will in everything. By this the standard for Christian life, that is, the truth, is changed.

Jesus knew that clinging to people will hold many back from entering the Kingdom of God. He loved people
more than anyone. He was aware that love means not compromising the message, or trying to make the narrow way broader, and that it is not possible to live with God without taking up the cross.

Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it. (Matthew 7:13-14)

Those who attempt to make the narrow way broader so that those they love are included, depart from the message of Jesus. They cannot then lead other people to God and will lose the way to life themselves. This is not love—even if it might look and feel like love to live up to the expectations of others.

It was for good reason that to those following him, Jesus said:

Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves their son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. Whoever does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it. (Matthew 10:37-39)

10 Friendship Evangelism Hinders Deeper Community Life

In order to maintain relationships with unbelievers you have to spend (much) time with them. If all believers do that, then they cannot really share deep committed relationships with one another, because each of them does different things during the week. They have trouble finding time to come together: one person has volleyball on Mondays, the other has art club on Tuesdays, another arranged to see a film with work colleagues on Wednesday...and so the list continues. There is simply not the time anymore to meet together each day to read the Bible and share their lives. This is not the pattern of life we can read of in the New Testament. Of the Jerusalem community we know:

They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. (Acts 2:42-47)

Here we see that the Christians devoted their lives to each other. They invited others to share this with them. Their common life was by no means a hindrance in having enough time to call unbelievers to life with God. We have much evidence of how they worked together to call people (instead of each one carrying out their own personal “mission”). Through sharing they were able to support one another and free up more capacity for evangelism and for fellowship. Their love for each other and the unity among them was the testimony to the change of life that salvation brings and demonstrated very visibly what it means to give one’s whole life to Christ.

See to it, brothers and sisters, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns
The writer of Hebrews encourages the Christians in this passage to show care and concern for each other’s spiritual lives every day. Furthermore, he connects this with a strong warning to ensure that everyone receives the help they need to overcome sin. The fight for holiness leads naturally to the recognition that we are weak, and need much strengthening in our Christian walk.

Part III Frequently Used Excuses

11 “Paul Said He Is a Jew to a Jew and a Greek to a Greek...So We Should Also Adapt to Where People Are at”

Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God’s law but am under Christ’s law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. (1 Corinthians 9:19–22)

It is clear that we are called to be sensitive to people—to understand where they are coming from, and, where possible, avoid things that might be an offense to them...but it is a grave mistake to use this passage as a license to justify sin in the name of “reaching out” to people. There is no indication in the New Testament that Christians took part in pagan activities in order to be “relatable” to them. History supports this. They were known for not partaking in the circus events, theatre or sports[3].

In the passage above, the mention of “those under the law” (= Jews) and “those not having the law” (= Gentiles) shows that Paul was referring to people’s cultural/religious background, not to individual lifestyles. In his evangelism, he was sensitive and respectful as far as his faith permitted, in order not to give offense unnecessarily.

One example of this respect concerned the Jewish law. The law was a particularly sensitive area for Jews, and understandably so, as it had been given by God. Utmost care was required of the apostles to lead the Jews to understand that it is no longer necessary to keep the formal aspects of the law. Romans chapter 14 describes how Paul became “weak”. He calls Jewish Christians who only eat vegetables (perhaps because the meat which was available was not kosher) “weak” in faith. Paul knew that he has the freedom in Christ to eat non-kosher meat, but for the sake of the Jewish Christians, whose conscience was weak in this point, he ate vegetables with them (Romans 14:20–21).

Toward Gentiles on the other hand, Paul showed that he, even as a Jew, is free to eat with them, despite their non-kosher food (1 Corinthians 10:27–30). He did not, however, take part in pagan rituals in order to be able to preach to them.

Paul became “all things to all men” for their salvation. He did everything possible to overcome cultural barriers, or barriers due to differing ways of thinking, but in doing so, he was careful not to make any
compromises. Compromises would have led to a distorted picture of Christian freedom, and hindered people from understanding how radically they must repent of their sinful lives in order to be saved.

Above all, Paul approached people “on their level” through his devotion. He sacrificed his time—indeed his whole life—in order to preach the word, often endangering his life in doing so, just as Christ did. By this he demonstrated that Christian life is not a life of following whatever leisure activities one fancies, but a life of self-sacrifice and devotion. In the following verses Paul expresses to what kind of life he called people:

Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore I do not run like someone running aimlessly; I do not fight like a boxer beating the air. No, I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.

(1 Corinthians 9:24–27)

Are they servants of Christ? (I am out of my mind to talk like this.) I am more. I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers. I have laboured and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn? If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness. The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, who is to be praised for ever, knows that I am not lying. In Damascus the governor under King Aretas had the city of the Damascenes guarded in order to arrest me. But I was lowered in a basket from a window in the wall and slipped through his hands.

(2 Corinthians 11:23–33)

...Not a “take it easy” life, but a life of seeking God’s will! Should Paul and his co-workers have joined people in their leisure activities, they would not have been able to show that life with Christ means renouncing such entertainment and dying to oneself in order to serve Christ. What could the world possibly give them that they did not have in Christ? How could Paul have borne such suffering for others, if he had given any place in his heart for selfish ambitions, let alone expensive, time-consuming and distracting hobbies?

Christ made himself nothing (Philippians 2:1–11). Paul followed his example. They both call us to do likewise—and by doing so, to become “all things to all men”.

12 “No-one Would Come to Our Meetings If We Only Spoke About God!”

This statement begs the question: “Have you yourself really understood who God is, and what he calls you to?”

If we are aware that God is the author of life, creator of the universe, source of love, hope, and all
fulfilment...how can it be a problem to speak “too much” about him? ...And if we cannot speak too much
about him, why should we act towards outsiders as though we could? They should see through our example
which importance God and his word has in our lives.

Many people get to know God’s word as a dry and lifeless book because they do not see it being put into
practice. It thereby remains for them an ancient text which is impossible to really understand and largely
irrelevant for modern life.

It is the task of Christians to open up the word of God to people. As they live by it, they connect its aged
words with modern, practical life. Suddenly, what was difficult to understand becomes a daily livable reality,
and the Bible is revealed as a fathomless source of strength and encouragement, correction and wisdom.

Why should we mix preaching God’s word with appealing to people’s tastes and wishes—providing
distractions and entertainment, as if it lacked something? Such practices only communicate to people that
the Bible is actually not as freeing, fulfilling and life-giving as it claims to be.

On the contrary, God’s word is the real “food”. If we truly appreciate it and live by it ourselves, then we will
not see it as “boring”, but will know how deeply satisfying it is, and will be able to help others to see it.

> The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you—they
are full of the Spirit and life. (John 6:63)

God’s word alone is life and freedom:

> Very truly I tell you, a time is coming and has now come when the dead will hear the
voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live. (John 5:25)

> To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, “If you hold to my teaching, you are really
my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” They
answered him, “We are Abraham’s descendants and have never been slaves of anyone.
How can you say that we shall be set free?” Jesus replied, “Very truly I tell you,
everyone who sins is a slave to sin. Now a slave has no permanent place in the family,
but a son belongs to it forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.”
(John 8:31–36)

It is the work of God, that people who earlier had little or no interest in God can turn and repent. That is why
we need not be afraid that the gospel can be “too much” for someone to hear. It is truly the “Good News”
that saves people from their sins. Those who are open for God deserve to have the chance to hear the
gospel in all its fullness so that they can repent. Preaching a “gospel” mixed with worldly attractions might
draw more people, but it cannot lead them to real repentance.

Jesus showed that we should not expect that many people will be open for the gospel. We should not feel
obliged, therefore, to adapt to the expectations of the masses.

> Someone asked him, “Lord, are only a few people going to be saved?” He said to them,
“Make every effort to enter through the narrow door, because many, I tell you, will try
to enter and will not be able to.” (Luke 13:23–24)
13 “We Should Be in the ‘World’…”

...but not of it! Unfortunately, the first part of this saying (it is not a direct quote from the Bible) is often emphasised, and the second part is given little attention. This saying is used as an excuse to partake in worldly activities, in the name of “evangelism”.

This is how Jesus speaks about the disciples being “in the world”:

I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world. (John 17:14–18)

Jesus called his disciples to be a light to the world—that is, to be where people are, and to call them to repentance. He knew that when they speak the truth as he did they will face persecution—but they should not for that reason leave the world. If however, they make compromises with the world they will be like salt which has lost its saltiness and is good for nothing. They can no longer help others to repent, nor attain salvation themselves. As previously cited, John expresses it like this:

Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, love for the Father is not in them. For everything in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but whoever does the will of God lives forever. (1 John 2:15–17)

14 “Jesus Went to Sinners (= Pubs/Parties...)”

This cliché can often be heard as an argument why Christians should attend parties held by unbelievers and go with them to pubs in order to speak with them about God. Youth pastors seem to have an especial fondness of this argument. Where do they take it from? There are no examples of Jesus taking part in the equivalent of worldly parties today—with immoral music and drunkenness.

If you count Zacchaeus, the tax collector who welcomed Jesus into his house and was so touched by what Jesus said that he repented of his greed...then yes, Jesus went to “sinners”—and in this sense, we should too.

A closer look at passages in the gospels which refer to such “sinners” reveals that it was often they who came to him, because they heard what he said and were convicted of the need to repent.

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.” (Luke 15:1–2)

Once again Jesus went out beside the lake. A large crowd came to him, and he began to teach them. As he walked along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax collector’s booth. “Follow me”, Jesus told him, and Levi got up and followed him. While
Jesus was having dinner at Levi’s house, many tax collectors and sinners were eating with him and his disciples, for there were many who followed him. (Mark 2:13–15)

These “sinners” had listened to John the Baptist preach that the messianic kingdom was near. They saw clearly that they were not in right standing with God and that they needed to repent. Having repented and been baptised by John, they were ready and waiting for the Messiah. When they heard Jesus speak, they were hungry for his message—in contrast to the Pharisees, to whom Jesus said:

Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him. (Matthew 21:31–32)

Jesus expected the people to have listened to John—a lone prophet, calling out in the desert, wearing camels hair. Obviously outward appearances, and adapting to people’s tastes was not something Jesus saw as necessary in order to call people to repentance. Jesus was not compelled to sink to the level of seeking his own fun or good times in partying, and then to slip in a few words about believing in him. He spoke openly and directly, turning to people with a clear message to repent of their self-willed lives to serve God.

This was not Jesus’ testimony: “I go out with my friends who drink, and show them a good example by not getting drunk / not drinking”; as can often be heard among religious youth. Such behaviour might be a “testimony” of a certain kind of moderation, but it misses the point of being a witness to the truth entirely. Jesus taught people openly that life with him means self-denial (for the sake of love) and not self-indulgence and pleasure-seeking, however “moderate”.

Should we call those who are escaping from the world to a milder version of the same pleasure-seeking and self-indulgence? If this is the result, then they are twice as lost as before—and we along with them.

15 “Jesus Even Made Water to Wine...He Enjoyed a Good Party”

The wedding at Cana (John 2:1–11) is often used as an example of Jesus going to “parties”. Regarding this opinion, several questions should be considered:

- Did Jesus want to condone excessive alcohol consumption?
- What kind of wedding was it?
- Why did Jesus perform this miracle?
- What do other Bible passages say about taking part in worldly activities?

We trust that with even a basic knowledge of Jesus, the first question can be answered with a confident “no”. Had the wedding guests truly have been “already drunk” (as people often interpret the statement of the master of the banquet in verse 10), Jesus would have supported them in alcohol abuse. An impossible presumption! Likewise, Mary’s request of Jesus, “They have no more wine”, was not to help the guests get drunk either. She was a very obedient believer and knew better than to ask her son, whose holiness she experienced closer than anyone, to support drunkenness.

On the contrary, this was a wedding of believers for whom God was the focus of their lives. Jesus along with his freshly appointed disciples had been invited—devout Jews. They were not together to indulge in their pleasures—unlike worldly parties among unbelievers. They were together in order to share their joy that two people had decided to join in the bond of holy matrimony and start a family.
This passage concludes with the words:

What Jesus did here in Cana of Galilee was the first of the signs through which he revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him. (John 2:11)

God’s glory was being revealed. The time of the messiah had begun with an abundance of new wine—a poignant Old Testament symbol of God’s blessing (Isaiah 25:6-8, Amos 9:11-15). The message contained in Jesus actions was not mistaken with an offer of “free beer”.

Parties do not have the aim to focus people’s attention on God but are purely for pleasure. They encourage superficial behaviour—though more often than not the behaviour/conversations of the people is far worse than just superficial. Peter contrasts the new lives of Christians with their former lives:

For you have spent enough time in the past doing what pagans choose to do—living in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing and detestable idolatry. They are surprised that you do not join them in their reckless, wild living, and they heap abuse on you. But they will have to give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead. (1 Peter 4:3-5)

Some religious people think that as long as they do not drink excessively at parties they are being good Christian examples. They fail to assess that it is not only the alcohol that is the problem. Here Paul describes what living a holy life includes:

Follow God’s example, therefore, as dearly loved children and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God’s holy people. Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving. For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person—such a person is an idolater—has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of such things God’s wrath comes on those who are disobedient. Therefore do not be partners with them. (Ephesians 5:1-7)

It is impossible to be together with people seeking their own pleasure—especially where there is alcohol—and not compromise this standard described by Paul. The jokes, superficiality, materialistic, earthly-minded or plainly immoral conversations, not to mention the immoral behaviour of people, all these make it impossible for a Christian to take part in such a gathering. We can only be a real testimony for God when we strive to reflect his holiness and purity in every area of our lives—which includes separating from bad influences of this like:

Do not be misled: “Bad company corrupts good character.” (1 Corinthians 15:33)

Those who look for excuses to take part in worldly activities such as parties should test themselves as to whether they actually like the worldliness. Perhaps this is the reason why they are so selective in which Bible passages they refer to for their standard for Christian life?
Finally, when all other attempts to defend friendship evangelism fail, we often hear:

16 “What’s the Problem? God Wants Us to Have Fun!”

The word “fun” does not appear once in the entire Bible. This statement comes rather from the wish to cling to worldly pleasures. Jesus promised something far deeper and more fulfilling:

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid. (John 14:27)

And on the night before his death, Jesus said to his disciples:

As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. (John 15:9–11)

Do you truly believe this?

For many religious people today, the reality of this joy and fulfilment is hidden, because they prefer to seek their own entertainment in the world—to such an extent that they imagine life without this entertainment to be “boring”. In such cases it is most visible that the true reason for taking part in such entertainment with unbelievers is not evangelism, but their own wishes. “Relatability” is just an excuse.

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17 Closing Thoughts

The one holy God, author of life and ruler of all, honours us by forgiving us and seeking a personal relationship with us. The smallest and only fitting act of thankfulness we can offer is to give our life back to him, wholly. Jesus enables his body (the Church) to live as he did—offering up a holy sacrifice of love, so that “in this world we are like him” (1 John 4:17). Through the love and unity of believers, God’s holiness, goodness and love are reflected, so that people are confronted with who God is and what it really means to acknowledge him in their lives. In this way people can understand what living in God’s presence means. Despite this testimony, for many this message will be a stumbling block—especially for religious people.

When someone professes to believe, but fails to live in awe of God (i.e. because of worldly activities and interests) their lives communicate a distorted picture of God, namely, that you can hold onto your own life and pleasures and please God at the same time. Through their lives, they deny that God himself and partaking in his service is the greatest source of joy in life and is incomparable with any worldly “joys”.

Combining “faith” with worldly activities in order to attract people is dishonest because it uses people’s desires in order to make them more “receptive”—just as any manipulative marketing strategy. Likewise, building friendships with the background motive of influencing people to start believing is dishonest and an infringement of their freedom.

Faith means being faithful to Jesus words in our life and our message even in the face of mockery or persecution, just as Jesus himself remained faithful to the truth to the end. We can only help people to be saved (and indeed be saved ourselves) if we do not compromise the message.
You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot. You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden.
(Matthew 5:13–14)

Footnotes

1. Unless otherwise noted all passages in this article are taken from NIV.

2. Here “prophesy” does not mean foretelling the future, but teaching for mutual edification, as described in the same chapter, verses 3–5: “But the one who prophesies speaks to people for their strengthening, encouraging and comfort. Anyone who speaks in a tongue edifies themselves, but the one who prophesies edifies the church. I would like every one of you to speak in tongues, but I would rather have you prophesy. The one who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in tongues, unless someone interprets, so that the church may be edified.”

3. An example from an early Christian apologist is that of Minucius Felix, who in “Octavius” portrays a dialogue between a pagan and a Christian based on discussions of his day. One of the characters in the dialogue, a pagan antagonist of the Christians named Caecilius, argues: “...In the meantime, living in suspense and anxiety, you abstain from respectable pleasures. You do not attend sporting events. You have no interest in public amusements. You reject the public banquets, and abhor the sacred games...Thus, wretched as you are, you will neither rise from the dead, nor enjoy life in the meanwhile.” (M. Felix, Octavius, chapter 12,5–6).