

# Introduction

## The Invisible Church

*'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.'*  
(Matthew 5:13)

### A burden for your marketplace

I have been a pastor in a medium-sized town in the UK for two decades. I know a lot of people. Some days I can walk down the high street and recognise nearly everyone. I can even remember some of their names.

On other days, I don't know anyone who shares the pavement with me, and they don't seem to know me. They also don't know my church or any church in the town (and there are plenty of churches – it's the Southern England Bible Belt here).

But much more important than whether they know me or the church is that so many of them don't know about Christ, and they are really not at all bothered about their ignorance. They don't even think they need to know; it has no relevance for them.

Most people are not interested in what is going on at our churches, however good the flyers, posters, and

promotional videos are. They don't think church is 'their thing', and anyway, they don't know, in any meaningful sense, anyone who is a member there. These are people you may not know at all, or you may just know them as regular faces on the street that you say hello to, but nothing more.

I see them walking by or driving past and I wonder how the gospel is ever going to reach them. What would make them look up with any curiosity or sense of need?

I wonder if you have ever had that experience? Have you ever felt a burden for the people in your town, city or country – those who will never get to hear about Jesus through their friends, families, neighbours and churches?

Think about all the voices they hear and all the images they see. How are they going to hear about the Saviour of the world?

They each have a worldview – and certainly not a Christian one – but they probably wouldn't recognise it as such even if you gave it a name and mentioned it to them. They are hopelessly lost, but most of the time they don't feel it.

They are just living their lives. They have jobs and families. They are worrying about their gardens, or how their kid is getting on in their new class or that medical procedure coming up, or about getting old. Some don't have a job and worry they will never get one. Some are worrying about their exams. They are thinking about that girl, or that boy, or the holiday they are planning. Maybe they've worked hard all week and want to completely get off their face tonight and have fun. Some are depressed and lonely.

They have their dreams but, at the same time, there is an anxiety about the future, but they are not looking to the church to give them answers. In the meantime, they

would like to have enough money and enough love to get by comfortably.

How are we going to break through? What will attract their gaze?

How can we enter their marketplace – the places that people go, share life, goods and ideas?

## **Commissioned**

In Matthew 28, when the risen Jesus was on His way back to the Father, He declared to His disciples that He has ‘all authority in heaven and on earth’ (v. 18). No one and nothing can stand in His way; He rules everywhere. He also promised that He would be always with them. Wherever they are, whatever day of the week it is, whoever they are talking to, He will be right there with them.

Then with that encouraging backdrop of the power and promise of Jesus, He says, ‘Go’ – make disciples and teach them. This command was not just for the original apostles, but for the church – all of us who have followed in their footsteps down the centuries.

In contrast to the Old Testament, when Gentiles (non-Jews) could experience the benefits of salvation only by journeying to Israel and the physical temple at Jerusalem, the spiritual, living temple of Christ’s church now goes out to the Gentiles, meeting them where they are.

For the apostles, their mission started locally in Jerusalem and then moved outwards through Judea and Samaria, and from there to the entire Roman world. They began at the temple and the synagogues but ended up preaching anywhere and everywhere, to Gentiles as well as Jews. As the gospel message extended across the world, apostles such as Paul went to local marketplaces and lecture halls. He walked and talked beside the river where people gathered. He spoke in courtrooms and

palaces. He went where the people were and where he could speak to them.

## Good news to share

One of the core convictions of this book is that God has commanded all Christians throughout all the ages to share the gospel – a treasure entrusted to us that is to be passed on. It is both a privilege and a responsibility (1 Cor. 9:16-18). I am sure you feel it too.

We all want to share good news: The child that has just come first at sports day, slightly to our surprise; that exam we passed after all the hard work; the medical test that came back negative, to our great relief; the special offer voucher code, the programme we watched on Netflix and can't wait to share with other people.

We want to tell someone our good news.

If we are Christians, we believe the story of Jesus Christ – living, dying, and rising again – is the very best of good news. Good news that we want to share.

Most of us do share it when we can; maybe not often enough because we get lazy or fearful; maybe sometimes we falter and fail – we stumble over our words. But we know what we are *meant* to do and, on our best days, we do.

'Relational' evangelism – gospel conversations and invitations – should be the heartbeat of church outreach. Churches should encourage and complement this by putting on events, not for their own sake but as an enabler for evangelism, to give focus and motivation for our personal interactions with others, seeking to draw in those who might never otherwise engage with the church's community or its message.

So personal, relational evangelism is really important. But that is not, in the main, what this book is about!

## Moving out

My passion in writing this book is that there are people we need to reach with the good news that we will never reach through our current family, work, and community connections.

We all have a role to play in sharing the gospel on the frontline (John 1:46, Eph. 4:11-13). And sometimes we need to find a new frontline. Why? Because we are not having much of an impact at the current one where we are engaged, the reason being that few people there are in the same ‘place’ as us.

The Office for National Statistics in the UK has published data from the 2021 census, showing that for the first time, less than half of the population in England and Wales – 27.5 million people (46.2 per cent) – described themselves as ‘Christian’.<sup>1</sup>

According to the ‘Talking Jesus’ survey,<sup>2</sup> ‘Practising Christians’ (those who attend church monthly, pray and read the Bible weekly) make up about 6 per cent of the UK population. That means about 1 in every 17 people is a practising Christian. That sounds pretty good, doesn’t it? Even if the figure is rather exaggerated (because not all ‘practising Christians’ really trust Jesus) it still means that you might look at a group queuing up at the supermarket checkouts and be reasonably hopeful of it containing a Christian or two. Reassuring, isn’t it?

But get this: according to the same survey, half the population do not know a practising Christian. And even those who do know a Christian don’t know them well enough to have a spiritual conversation. Practising

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1. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/religion/bulletins/religionenglandandwales/census2021>. Accessed 12 December 2023.

2. <https://talkingjesus.org/2022-research/> Accessed 20 March 2023.

Christians are practically invisible to 50 per cent of people in the UK.

On an average Sunday, 98 per cent of the UK population is not inside an evangelical church. Whether you go with any of the ideas in this book or not, this is the stark reality we have to face. This means that in my town of about 40,000 people, no more than 800 will be in a church where they will hear the gospel; 39,200 of the townspeople will not. Do the numbers for where you live, or even just for your street. Doesn't it move something in you to wonder if we could do more to reach them?

We may start with our family and our friends, the people we work with, and those we 'do life' with. We may witness through the outreach of our local church and we may teach all ages about Jesus. But we often do not move beyond that.

But if we are to fulfil Jesus' command to 'Go' there must be some further outward movement. It must include a displacement from here to there. Of course, there is an 'all nations' element to this trajectory; we need to be world Christians, seeing every people, tribe, and tongue as our mission field, and employing the expertise and contacts of mission agencies to facilitate the local church's sending of its members to reach the lost across the globe. But nearer to home, it means crossing other boundaries to make the gospel known – moving outside the church to eventually bring them inside.

We must progress from our local contacts to our workplaces and schools, but further still to our high streets and beaches. We must go from door to door and to our centres of philosophy and learning; to the online and offline communities, from tablet to smartphone, and to anywhere that people gather. We must go local and national.

I wrote this book for people who want to think about how we become more *visible*; how we get the gospel to the vast majority around us who don't know a Christian yet. It's for those who want to think through some ideas on how we get into the *marketplace* – the everyday lives, ideas, imaginations and ideologies of people who will never bump into us on the street.

Please understand: I in no way wish to diminish the importance of personal evangelism or church gatherings where we preach the gospel. But just as the apostles and early church began in the synagogues, among those who already had a very real spiritual interest, but then ventured far beyond such places and people, I am calling on us too, to go much further than those places where people gather who already have some interest in what we have to say.

Yes, we know that God is sovereign and He has given us the contacts we already have, and we need to start there. We know it's not about techniques and methods or a slick marketing campaign, and the gospel will only bear fruit if the Holy Spirit is at work.

But the danger in knowing it is not in our power to make people believe is that we may end up making no effort and having no plan. We may content ourselves with putting on a few events and asking some of our friends and family along now and then.

What I hope is that this book will spur us on to make an effort and develop a plan.

This is not a book for 'professionals' who can gain a profile in the national media while the rest of us pray from the sidelines and send financial donations. It's less of a 'how-to-do-it' book and more about the principle and possibilities, together with some examples, so that you might then seek to apply these in your own context with the gifts and opportunities you have.

This, then, is a book for ordinary Christians to think through how to reach more people with the good news. What can I do and how do I support those who are pioneering connections to make Christ more visible?

## The roadmap

To help you navigate this book, here's a description of the journey.

We will start in chapter one with a definition of the marketplace and how we can witness there in a variety of ways.

In the marketplace we will meet all kinds of ideas, questions, and objections. So in chapter two we will consider what some of these ideas are and what kind of conversations could result, and how we might navigate them. Because the gospel is true it can be defended from a logical and evidential point of view. It's not just about feeling the conviction of our calling; we also need a degree of confidence that the gospel is relevant and powerful – it really does work – and that it has power to save and transform lives (Rom. 1:16).

Then in the final four chapters we will consider methods of taking the message out, some very ancient and others very contemporary, from street preaching to broadcast and social media. I want to encourage many more people to get involved. For some of you, this will be new and exciting and maybe on a bigger scale than you have ever experienced (these days it isn't as hard to break into as you might think).

Others of you reading this book may be inspired to grow a network of contacts for you and your church, confident that you can have these kinds of conversations. You don't need any special training; you just need the



Word of God, His Holy Spirit, and your own willingness to serve.

I have no great theological qualifications, so as I wrote I was thinking about all the different kinds of people I have met on my journey so far. And I was writing for people like me – and you – who live and work and socialise with people who are not Christians yet.

Finally, I confess that I am not doing all the things I talk about in this book. I am not even doing some of the things I could easily do. I am at times fearful, lazy, and lacking in compassion. But I have done most of the things I have written about at least once, and some I have done a lot!

All of us can be a part of reaching the millions who are lost in the UK. We just need to find our place. My prayer is that you will be inspired and feel accountable as we go through this journey together.

## **Questions for reflection and discussion**

1. What does the Great Commission (Matt. 28:16-20) mean to you?
2. How do you feel about the people in your town who may not know any Christians? Is your attitude an appropriate one for a Christian to have?
3. Do you have any ideas about how you might be able to reach people you currently do not know?