

HOW TO

TALK TO

ANYONE

ABOUT

JESUS

A person wearing a full-body yellow chicken costume with a red comb and wattle is standing on a city sidewalk. They are holding a large white sign with bold black text. The sign reads "GOOD NEWS FOR A CHANGE". The words "FOR A" are written in a smaller, red, handwritten-style font and are underlined with a red brushstroke. The background shows a blurred city street with traffic lights and buildings.

**GOOD
NEWS
FOR A
CHANGE**

MATT MIKALATOS

While most of us aren't full-time, vocational evangelists, we're all capable of having God use us to bear witness to Christ's work in our life. In *Good News for a Change*, my friend Matt helps us overcome our fears and grasp the practical ways we all can be liberated to join God's timeless quest to build his Kingdom, life by life.

KEVIN PALAU, president, Luis Palau Association

I don't like books on evangelism. As a general rule, sharing the good news of Jesus is learned better on the street than in the classroom. But this book is different. Very different. For it is crafted by someone who knows the streets and has years of experience sharing Jesus with real, everyday, normal people. This book does two things: It presents the good news of Jesus as both good and news. In an age of fake news, this teaches us how we can share the good news, not fake goods, in a way that is good and life-giving. Mikalatos should get an award for this book. It is a masterpiece.

A. J. SWOBODA, PhD, pastor and author of *Subversive Sabbath: The Surprising Power of Rest in a Nonstop World*

Matt Mikalatos is a brilliant writer and teacher. *Good News for a Change* combines solid Bible teaching, relevant issues, compassion, humor, and practical application. The reader benefits from both the *why?* and *how?* of evangelism as Matt shares actual conversations from personal experience

with clear, sharp, thoughtful insights. I appreciate Matt's humble, learner posture and the thorough research used in addressing our current social landscape. Refreshing, pertinent, challenging, relatable—I highly recommend this book!

VIVIAN MABUNI, speaker and author of *Warrior in Pink: A Story of Cancer, Community, and the God Who Comforts*

Every Christian I know is afraid of evangelism. We all know we're supposed to do it, but none of us is any good at it. In *Good News for a Change*, Matt Mikalatos has shared with us his gifts as an evangelist. With the expertise of a teacher, the love of a mentor, and the passion of an artist, Matt demystifies the process of telling people about Jesus. As every great thinker does, he shows us that we don't need more information. We need a new way to look at the work God is already doing in our lives. *Good News for a Change* is a practical, inspiring, and exciting return to our first love—and what's easier to share than that?

JR FORASTEROS, pastor and author of *Empathy for the Devil: Finding Ourselves in the Villains of the Bible*

In today's argument culture, Christians are leery to share their perspective. After all, who wants to get into a heated religious argument with a friend or coworker? Mikalatos reminds us that *everyone* along the social spectrum enjoys hearing one thing—good news. Through engaging stories,

helpful communication exercises, and insightful handling of the Scriptures, readers are reminded that the story of Jesus is not only inherently good but also attractive to others.

TIM MUEHLHOFF, PhD, professor of communication studies, Biola University, and author of *Winsome Persuasion: Christian Influence in a Post-Christian World*

A lot of us who grew up in a Christian fundamental environment often felt like we were doing Christianity wrong. If we didn't "win souls" by telling people they were sinners destined for the fiery pits of hell, then we must have been ashamed of Jesus, which meant we probably didn't truly love God. At best, evangelism was an icky sales pitch chore we were required to do. At worst, we may have driven away loved ones and developed resentment or worse toward the God who saves. In *Good News for a Change*, Matt reminds us why the truth of Jesus is such good news. Sharing in that truth is a privilege—exciting and beautiful, and not even a little icky.

CLAY MORGAN, author of *Undead: Revived, Resuscitated, Reborn*

I loved this book! Evangelism can be scary. We often love Jesus but are intimidated to talk about him with others. Fortunately, Matt Mikalatos is here to the rescue: with funny stories from his personal experience and illuminating insights from Scripture, he breaks down stereotypes of stuffy evangelism so you can enter the

freedom and joy of fresh, creative, respectful, and down-to-earth ways to catalyze life-giving conversations about Jesus. I plan to use this when training others and have already begun putting some of his ideas into practice myself!

JOSHUA RYAN BUTLER, pastor at Imago Dei Community in Portland, Oregon, and author of *The Skeletons in God's Closet* and *The Pursuing God*

In the past twenty years, there has been a revolution in our understanding of evangelism and what it means to share the good news. Without fanfare or folderol, Matt Mikalatos takes the best of what we've learned and gives us a toolbox of creative resources and handy instruments that can help us lift up Christ in energizing and compelling ways.

LEONARD SWEET, author, professor, and founder and chief contributor to preachthestory.com

GOOD NEWS FOR A CHANGE



MATT MIKALATOS

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INTRODUCTION

Good News about Evangelism

MY FRIEND RICK came to Christ while watching a cigar-smoking '80s televangelist who wore sunglasses and strange hats and made long, rambling speeches punctuated by sudden cut-aways to a band playing Jesus songs. Years later, Rick, now a pastor, visited the televangelist's church, excited to see the man who had led him to Christ. He left disappointed by the nonsensical sermon and uncertain whether the televangelist knew Jesus himself.

I know a woman who came to Christ after two cult missionaries visited her house and she misunderstood their message. Despite their intentions, she prayed to receive Christ and started attending a local evangelical church.

I know a man who came to Christ while smoking pot with a buddy. His friend started crying and saying what a terrible Christian he was, that he used pot and misused alcohol and wished he could get his life together. My friend was interested in the whole concept, met Jesus, stopped smoking pot, and joined staff with a Christian nonprofit.

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I've met people who came to Christ after getting picked up by believers while hitchhiking. I've talked with more than one person who came to Christ through Billy Graham's ministry. I know people who came to Christ through street preachers, vacation Bible schools, televangelists, neighbors, family members, miraculous healings, sermons at funerals, sermons at weddings, and conversations at Christmas parties. I know of one person who came to him through an interaction with a Christian homeless woman. And once I met a guy who came to Christ out of Hinduism because while bowing down to a (literal) sacred cow, it kicked him in the head. "I knew there had to be a better way," he said.

I especially love my friend John's story. In college, he joined a Christian student group and went with them on a weeklong mission trip to Las Vegas, where they were going to "evangelize" the tourists. Part of the training was learning to use the *Four Spiritual Laws*, a religious tract for sharing the gospel. Before going out to share it with others, John read the booklet himself. After reading the basics of the good news and a "salvation prayer," he encountered a key question: "Does this prayer express the desire of your heart?" John decided it did and *led himself to Christ*. That's a good start to a mission trip.

God brings people to himself however he pleases. The good news really is good news, and it breaks through the noise around us in countless ways.

It's tempting to think, then, that we have no role to play. God could, after all, train parrots to share the good news and

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send them out into the world to perch in trees and say, “Jesus loves you” and “You’re a sinner” and so on. Then we would never have to feel weird by talking to someone about Jesus; we could just make sure to put some crackers near the homes of our friends who don’t know God and trust his feathered evangelists to make things clear.

But—and this is important—just because God can use any means to bring someone to himself doesn’t mean he doesn’t want us involved. While God can use any means, any person, any situation to speak good news into someone’s life, he offers us the privilege and blessing of partnering together to do that. It’s a gift to get to share good news, to participate in God’s work in someone else’s life.

I love my friend John, and I’m so pleased he led himself to Christ . . . and I wish I could have been a more central part of that process! To be in that conversation with John would have let me see firsthand how God was at work in John’s life, would have given me new insights into what exactly this good news means. That’s a big deal, to participate with God in communicating the good news. And we seem to forget that, or we’re so intimidated by the idea of this thing we call evangelism that we don’t try. After all, for a lot of us, our first response to someone coming to Christ isn’t wishing we could have been involved. It’s not hard to imagine sitting down with a neighbor who has just come to Jesus and thinking, with some relief, *Whew! I guess I don’t have to share the gospel with them after all!*

And I get it. I do. Over the years, we’ve turned evangelism into a transactional thing, where all the pressure is on us to

make the sale. In our consumer culture, we think we have to convince someone they really need this salvation thing, and we're a failure if they don't get it.

It's scary. It's uncomfortable. It's awkward. And it also doesn't have to be that way. It *shouldn't* be that way.

I worked for a less-than-reputable photography studio for a while during college. My job was to man the telephone in a little back room and dial through a list of numbers. When the person on the other end picked up, I started into a whole script: "Good news! My less-than-reputable photography studio is running a sale on portraits!" (Okay, maybe not quite that, but close.) I had a script for what to say to their objections (Them: "I'm too ugly for pictures." Me: "Sir, no one is ugly to their loved ones.") and to their questions about pets ("Legal pets are allowed."), taking photos naked ("Um . . . no."), and how they could convince their grandchildren to send pictures more often ("Portraits make a wonderful gift."). All the while, my manager stood nearby, arms folded as we made cold calls, shaking his head when we answered the questions wrong and marking our referrals and sales next to our names on a whiteboard.

When it comes to evangelism, some of us, or maybe a lot of us, picture God a lot like that manager: the disapproving, scowling overseer who watches from a distance, disappointed that we're not working harder, selling better, dialing more. And that terrible misunderstanding of evangelism—the forced sales pitch—comes from a fundamental misunderstanding of the good news.

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At the photo studio, we needed rhetorical tricks and scripts and sales techniques because our product was terrible and was always on sale. The supposed good news was false. (You may have gathered that I didn't last long there.)

With the gospel, we need to get past the sales tactics and high-pressure techniques *because we don't need them*. A well-honed sales pitch reveals that we've forgotten the gospel is, at its core, good news. It was good news for us, and it's good news for the people with whom we're sharing.

I hated my job selling those portraits, and if you think of evangelism this way, it makes sense to hate it, too. But that's not what evangelism is.

Evangelism is, first and foremost, *us participating with the Holy Spirit to tell people about God and his love for them* and to invite them into a relationship with him. Because we're doing the work together with the Holy Spirit, we can trust that God will pick up the slack where we're failing. God wants us to participate, but it is God who ultimately makes the good news clear to our listeners. In fact, Paul said that even when someone shared the good news with evil motives, he was still happy the message was going out.¹

That's the good news about evangelism: If you're doing it at all, you're doing it right. There are people who will line up to tell you the "right way" to talk about Jesus or say you're not truly sharing the gospel unless you do it a specific way, but if you're doing it at all, that's something God can and will use. It's difficult to do evangelism the wrong way.

That's why the book you are about to read is not about

judgment. It's not designed to make you feel guilty about evangelism or to make you feel bad for the way you do it. Nobody's going to pull out a scorecard or a whiteboard with your name on it to keep track of your "sales." The point of this book is to talk about ways we can more fully participate with God in the beautiful work of bringing human beings back into the loving embrace of the one who made them.

We'll talk about the gospel and what it is, how it functions, and what it means to be witnesses. We'll consider whether the gospel "changes" for different people or is one precise message for everyone. We'll discuss how to talk about Jesus with coworkers, your family, and those in your neighborhood—without looking like a crazy person.

Mainly, we're going to talk about how to have conversations about Jesus where even people hostile to Christianity thank you afterward and feel loved and excited about the conversation—and where you feel excited and comfortable with the conversation too. That sounds crazy, I know, but it's true. We'll discuss some tools that will give you confidence to talk to anyone you know, anyone you meet, about the excellent good news of Jesus.

Each chapter will have questions to consider, exercises to try, and suggestions for joining God in the beautiful plan of redemption. I pray you will find these resources helpful, energizing, and transformative.

Using the underpinning philosophy in this book, I've led an atheist Bible study; shared the good news with a millionaire on an airplane while she clutched my hand and prayed

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we wouldn't crash; sat beneath an oak tree with a Satanist, chatting about the beauty of Jesus; and seen a Buddhist accept Christ after a fifteen-minute conversation.

If you think those are things you can't possibly do, just wait. I promise, this really is the good news about evangelism: It's much easier than you thought. Talking to people about the good news is one of the most fun, interesting, and exciting adventures you could possibly embark on. You are going to enjoy it! And along the way, God is going to change some lives.

That's the best news of all.

CHAPTER 1

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO GOD

The Unchanging Message of the Good News

THERE WAS A KNOCK at my dorm-room door.

I opened it to find another student standing there, a young man I didn't know. Before I could say a word, he said, "You need to stop smoking pot, stop sleeping with your girlfriend, and come to Jesus."

Startled and unsure what was happening, I said, "My girlfriend lives eight hours away, and I've never smoked pot."

He shook his head, as if I had completely misunderstood his message, and said again, "You need to stop smoking pot, stop sleeping with your girlfriend, and come to Jesus."

"Listen," I said. "I don't smoke, and I couldn't sleep with

my girlfriend if I wanted to. She lives on the other side of the state.”

“I know you love pot,” he said. “I know you sleep around. But you’ve got to come to Jesus.”

“I’m already a Christian,” I said.

He threw his arms wide, a huge grin on his face, and shouted, “Brother!”

That was not an enjoyable way to hear the so-called good news. Could the Holy Spirit use that young man’s passionate initiative to bring someone to saving knowledge of him? Absolutely. Would I like to go back in time and give that kid some gentle advice? Yes, please.

Sometimes we forget the gospel is good news. We think we have to battle people with the gospel, that we have to confront them and beat them down. There’s a reason the term “Bible thumper” exists. We think we’re in a war and we have to “win people to Christ.” It’s a contest, a battle, a game, a conflict.

In that context, it’s not “good news.” It’s propaganda. And when we see evangelism as conflict, we immediately put our listeners on the defensive. When I was a college student, “stop smoking pot, stop sleeping with your girlfriend, and come to Jesus” was unrecognizable to me as good news. My would-be evangelist told me, “You need a different moral code.” That’s not good news; that’s a philosophical argument waiting to happen.

So if the good news isn’t “stop sinning and come to Jesus,” what is it?

Let's Talk about Jesus

The gospel is ultimately about Jesus.

There is an awful lot of good news about Jesus, and it's not just that he died for our sins and was raised again on the third day. Healing the sick, that was good news. Being born to Mary, that was good news. The forgiveness he gave to those caught up in evil behavior in their lives, that's good news. The way he interacted with women as people worthy of respect, that's good news. His ascension, the Transfiguration, the time he stayed in the Temple when his parents were walking home and he was "lost" from them for a few days: good news. His parables, his teachings, the feeding of the gigantic crowds—these things are all good news.

Any "gospel presentation" is, by definition, only shorthand for the "full gospel." There's no such thing as a complete gospel presentation, because Jesus is an eternal person, and all the news about him is good; which means part of the work of eternity will be getting to know him and growing in our knowledge of the good news. We don't know the entire gospel now, nor will we ever, because we will never exhaust the knowledge of Jesus' goodness. The good news we know is amazing, and the good news as we get to know Jesus only deepens and grows.

Nevertheless, there is a sort of "core" gospel that we'll refer to as the "universal gospel." It's the good news that is true for every person on earth, no matter their background, culture, ethnicity, or social status. It's good news that may take some

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work to understand for some, but most of us, when we think of evangelism, think precisely of this universal gospel: How do I tell someone the core, salvific truth of the good news?

My favorite place to start the universal good news is with the most famous Bible verse of them all, John 3:16: “God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” The most basic, core message of the gospel is “believe in Jesus and receive eternal life.”

This one verse also tells us God’s *motivation* in saving humanity: He loves us. That’s part of the gospel, too, and for many of us, the most unbelievable, baffling bit. I’ve had more than one person tell me it’s the one thing about the gospel that they just cannot believe.

People start throwing up all sorts of objections to this simple idea, like “You don’t know what I’ve done. God couldn’t possibly love someone like me.”

But as Paul writes in Romans 5:8, *While we were still sinners, Christ died for us* (NKJV). Christ died for sinners. Why? What was his motivation? Because *God loved the world so much*. Jesus didn’t come into the world to condemn the world but to save it. If we love him, it’s because he loved us first.¹

The simplest, core bit of the universal gospel is all in John 3:16. It doesn’t spell everything out—it implies the other pieces, assuming maybe you already know them. For instance, it doesn’t say “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God”² or “The wages of sin is death”³ (both part of the universal gospel in the sense they are the bad news that

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the good news answers), but it says that if we believe in Jesus, we don't have to perish. It sort of assumes we know that everyone dies rather than spelling it all out for us.

I have plenty of friends who, if they were going to choose a passage to boil the gospel down to its core bit, would rather use 1 Corinthians 15:1-6:

Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain.

For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep.

This passage answers a question we might have had after reading John 3:16: What exactly do I have to believe about Jesus to be saved? Paul (the author of 1 Corinthians) lays it out for us: Christ (the Savior sent from God) died for our sins and also came back from the dead to show God's power

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over death. Our sins, Jesus' death, and Jesus' resurrection come together as the seed of the gospel. It's still a sort of shorthand—it's not the whole gospel, but it's a piece that lodges like a seed into the soil of the human heart.

Maybe that's what the young man at my dorm-room door was trying to get at: "Stop sinning and come to Jesus." But somehow his words didn't communicate that universal gospel to me. What I heard was, "Agree with my morality and convert to my religion." I didn't recognize the good news in what he said . . . or at least in the way he said it.

At nearly the same time I was talking to that young man in Southern California, Krista, the woman whom I would one day marry, was on a tour in southern China with her college history class.

Krista asked her tour guide, "What god do you worship?" She was from an ethnic minority in those southern regions.

"I worship the god of my tribe," the young woman replied. "What god do you worship?"

Krista said, "I worship a God of the whole world . . . a God for every tribe on earth."

Shocked, the tour guide said, "I have never heard of a god for all people! Tell me more."

There's that good news again . . . a God for the whole world. God loved the whole world, which includes you and me, Krista, and a tour guide from southern China. So the thing about the universal gospel isn't that it's not attractive, or hopeful, or life changing. It's all those things and more. But sometimes we forget how individually, personally life

changing it really is. We are so worried about getting the “facts” right that we forget to check if the person we’re talking to even gets why it’s good news. But once we understand the kaleidoscopic beauty of the universal gospel—for ourselves and for every person around us—everything changes.



Reflection Questions

1. Restate what the young man said at my dorm-room door to make it sound more like good news. Is there a way to keep his basic message but say it in a way that reveals good news? How much would you need to know about the person listening to your message to make the good news clear?
2. What does God’s motivation in sending Jesus suggest about our own motivation in sharing Christ? What should we do if we find ourselves motivated by fear, guilt, judgment, or shame instead of love?
3. Read the 1 Corinthians 15 passage again and think back to the time before you knew Jesus. If someone had come to you and read that passage, alone and without explanation, how would you have responded? Would you have recognized it as good news or not?

Exercises

1. Get together with a Christian friend and take turns sharing the good news with one another, using only Scripture as your springboard to conversation. The first person gets to use any verse they like from John 3. The next person can use 1 Corinthians 15:1-6. Then look together at the “Romans Road”: Romans 3:23; 6:23; 5:8; 10:9; and 5:1. (This will be easiest if you stick to the order I listed them in.) This is a no-risk way to practice good news conversations . . . and it will help you keep the ideas of the universal good news in mind.
2. Choose a verse or verses from the Bible that really speak to you about good news, and memorize them. Memorization is a great way to get the good news to seep into our bones so it becomes second nature. If you have a hard time memorizing, just text the verse to yourself twice a day, once in the morning and once at night, until you don’t need to look at your Bible anymore. (Obviously, don’t just forward the text, you cheater—type it in each time.) Don’t worry too much about getting it all word-for-word—the concepts are just as important as the precise wording.