

FEATURING ORIGINAL RESEARCH FROM BARNA

Don Everts

The
Reluctant
Witness

Discovering
the Delight
of Spiritual
Conversations



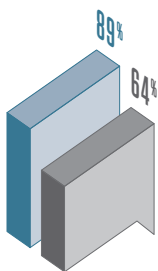
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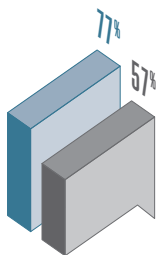
CHANGES IN SPIRITUAL CONVERSATIONS OVER 25 YEARS

TODAY, CHRISTIANS ARE LESS LIKELY TO...

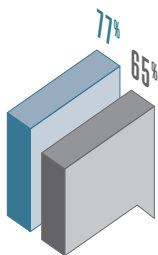
● 1993 ● Today



Believe every Christian has a responsibility to share their faith



Claim their church does a good job of training people to share their faith

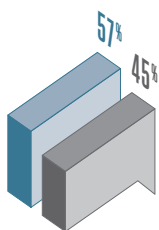


Share by the way they live, rather than speaking about it

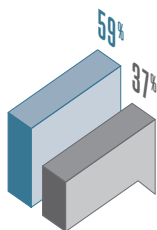


Speak about the changes/benefits of accepting Jesus

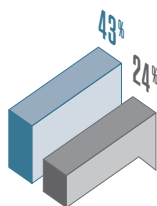
FIGURE 1.1



**Tell the story
of how they
first came
to believe
in Jesus**



**Quote passages
from the Bible
when sharing
their faith**



**Challenge
someone
to defend
their beliefs**

1993: *n*=446 Christians who have had a conversation about their faith, August 14–20, 1993;

Today: *n*=796 Christians who have had a conversation about their faith, June 22–July 13, 2017.

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

ACTS 2:42-47



Reluctant Conversationalists

Getting Honest About the State of Our Witness

I'M SITTING AT A GRAY METAL DESK in the basement of a nearly abandoned local church that has donated office space to some of us campus ministers. It's snowing outside the church, a beautiful Boulder, Colorado, winter day. But I'm not gazing out at the snow, I'm staring down at a blank sheet of paper that is confounding me.

This is odd. I'm a writer at heart, I like blank pages. I usually never meet a blank page I don't like—they inspire me and help me think. But I'm having a problem with this particular blank page. I work on a nearby campus for InterVarsity and I'm supposed to be writing my monthly report. My supervisor has asked me to look back at the last month and characterize my efforts on campus and

assess the fruit that has resulted. Sounds simple enough. But I'm grouching. I'm confounded. I don't like this assignment.

Characterize my efforts on campus? How can you sum up in mere words and sentences thirty long days of labor that have been so messy, so sublime, so context-driven? And assess the fruit? How do you count spiritual fruit? Is it possible to quantify the fruit of relational evangelism? Is it even right to try to count spiritual fruit that only God can produce?

These were the lofty thoughts and justifications rolling around in my head as I stared at that blank sheet of paper. But mostly I was just insecure.

It is a tender thing to characterize your own efforts to share the gospel. All Christians are sent on a mission: Again, as Jesus said, "You will be my witnesses" (Acts 1:8). A witness talks about what they've seen or experienced. In this case, Christians are called to talk about their experience with Jesus so that others may have a chance to meet and ultimately follow Jesus.

Many of us know this. But to reflect on and characterize our faithfulness in that mission can be tender. Vulnerable even. It's enough to get your justification juices flowing, just like mine were while sitting at that metal desk staring at that blank sheet of paper.

This is especially true if you dare take the second step of evaluation I had been asked to take: to assess the fruit of my efforts. *Have I been a witness?* is a scary enough question to ask (though

there's still plenty of wiggle room in that question). But to ask, *Have I made any new disciples?* That is an entirely different level of scary. It is vulnerable. And uncomfortable.

And for this reason, it is, I'm assuming, mighty tempting to lay this book (and topic) aside at this point. What good could come of getting honest about the state of my witness? A renewed sense of guilt? A burst of inspiration that sets me up to be disappointed once again? If these thoughts are going through your mind, I urge you to keep reading. I invite you to dare to get honest about the state of your witness for this reason: honest self-reflection about mission has been an explicitly important feature in the lives of Christians from the very beginning.

The Importance of Honest Self-Evaluation

The Acts 2 passage that you read at the beginning of this chapter is pretty well-known. It's exciting and inspirational. Luke (who wrote the book of Acts) gives a summary of the church's efforts and the resulting fruit that has motivated many generations of Christians as a beautiful snapshot of Jesus' church doing what that church was meant to do.

But it is also meaningful to pull back and notice the simple fact that Luke summarized a snapshot of the church. Luke did what was so difficult for me to do sitting at my desk: he characterized the church's efforts (they devoted themselves to . . .) and

he quantified the fruit that resulted (and the Lord added to their number day by day). And here's something that should get our attention: he kept doing this, over and over.

Scholars have noted this important literary feature in Acts: regular snapshots of the church's efforts and the resulting fruit. In fact, many scholars suggest these 30,000-foot snapshots mark the basic structure of Luke's writing: a few on-the-ground detailed stories of God's work through the church punctuated by snapshots that characterize the church's mission and the resulting fruit.

These snapshots do two things: they characterize the church's labors (notice the verbs), and they also assess the resulting fruit (while the fruit of the kingdom of God is not always numeric in nature, here in Acts Luke does place an emphasis on the numeric). See table 1.1 for a few examples.

Luke didn't balk at providing a snapshot of the church's labors and resulting fruit, rather he leaned into it as if this were an important thing to do. And this should get our attention. If it was so important for the early church to regularly take a look in the mirror and have an updated snapshot of the "state of the church's mission," perhaps this is a habit we shouldn't set aside too quickly.

It can be painful to honestly evaluate our own witness. But it might turn out to be vitally important. I got a taste of that back in Colorado. Rather than give in to my insecurities and loftily justify my way out of writing an honest monthly report, I dared

CHARACTERIZE THE CHURCH'S LABORS	ASSESS THE RESULTING FRUIT
<p>...they were <i>speaking</i> to the people... (4:1)</p>	<p>But <i>many</i> of those who had heard the word believed, and <i>the number</i> of the men came to about <i>five thousand</i>. (4:4)</p>
<p>Now many <i>signs</i> and <i>wonders</i> were regularly done among the people by the hands of the apostles. (5:12)</p>	<p>And more than ever believers were <i>added</i> to the Lord, <i>multitudes</i> of both men and women. (5:14)</p>
<p>And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease <i>teaching and preaching</i> that the Christ is Jesus. (5:42)</p>	<p>...the disciples were <i>increasing in number</i>,...and the <i>number</i> of the disciples <i>multiplied greatly</i> in Jerusalem, and a <i>great many</i> of the priests became obedient to the faith. (6:1,7)</p>
<p>So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was <i>being built up</i>. (9:31a)</p>	<p>And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it <i>multiplied</i>. (9:31b)</p>
<p>And Paul and Barnabas <i>spoke out boldly</i>... (13:46a)</p>	<p>And the word of the Lord was <i>spreading</i> throughout the whole region. (13:49)</p>
<p>As they went on their way through the cities, they <i>delivered</i> to them for observance the decisions that had been reached... (16:4a)</p>	<p>So the churches were strengthened in the faith, and they <i>increased in numbers daily</i>. (16:5)</p>

TABLE 1.1

to look into the mirror. I characterized my efforts at sharing the gospel. (How often was I engaging in conversations with the people around me? Was Jesus ever coming up in those conversations? Was I spending any time with non-Christians, or had I filled up my life with Christian students?) And I even tried to assess the fruit that had resulted from my efforts. (How many non-Christians were involved in our group's events? Had anyone begun to trust Jesus for the first time?)

Writing that monthly report was awkward, but over time, month by month, I began to gain an appreciation for the model Luke left us. There is something right and healthy and refreshing about regularly taking a look in the witness mirror.

The State of Our Witness

How would you characterize your own witness efforts? A characterization must be accurate enough to truly name reality, but short enough to be memorable and useable. Getting to a place where you can honestly characterize your own witness efforts should take some time and work. The process should force you to reflect and think. We read one of Luke's characterizations of the witness of the early church at the beginning of this chapter: *they were devoted followers of Jesus and they had favor with all the people.* And the result? *God was adding to their number daily.*

So, how would you characterize your own witness? This is a tricky thing to do. It can be difficult to get perspective on ourselves, and Luke certainly isn't around to help us. So, let's begin this way: let's look in the mirror together. A big collective gaze in the mirror: How is the church in the United States doing with witness? This collective gaze should help us each jump-start our own personal self-reflection.

And this collective gaze really is possible because of a recent partnership between two Christian organizations. Lutheran Hour Ministries recently partnered with Barna Group to assess the state of witness in the US church. Their careful qualitative and quantitative research produced a fascinating snapshot of the state of witness in the United States.¹

Comparing their findings with a similar study they did twenty-five years ago, Lutheran Hour Ministries and Barna Group have given the US church a gift: an accurate look in the mirror. Details of their findings can be found in the Barna Report *Spiritual Conversations in the Digital Age: How Christians' Approach to Sharing Their Faith Has Changed in 25 Years*.² But even a brief overview of what they found (as you can see in figure 1.1 at the beginning of this chapter) can help each of us kick-start our own self-reflection. So, what does this research show us about ourselves?

Finding 1. We are having fewer spiritual conversations.
To put it simply, Americans today are less involved in spiritual

conversations than we were twenty-five years ago. A “spiritual conversation” is defined as *any* conversation about spiritual or faith matters (including doubts) with *anyone*. This would include talking about Jesus with a non-Christian friend but would also include talking about the sermon you just heard with your spouse.

These spiritual conversations could have been in person but also could have occurred on the phone, via text, or even on social media. In this way the researchers used a fairly broad definition for spiritual conversations.

Yet even with a broad definition for spiritual conversations, as you can see in figure 1.2, most of us (74% of us) are having fewer than ten spiritual conversations a year. We are what the researchers characterize as “reluctant conversationalists.”

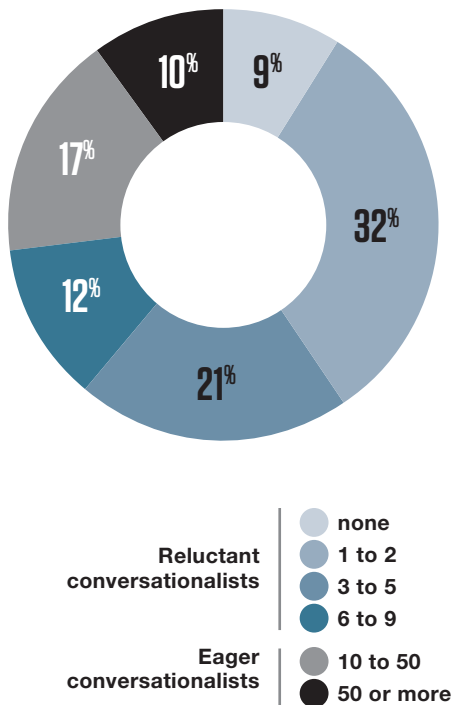
As you look at figure 1.2, where do you intuitively think you land—on the reluctant or eager side of things?

How many spiritual conversations did you have over the last twelve months? (Spend time estimating and calculating this for yourself. How often do you talk with others about your faith?)

Finding 2. We are uncomfortable with spiritual conversations. On the whole our engagement in spiritual conversations has gotten worse over the last twenty-five years, especially when it comes to spiritual conversations with non-Christians. The reality is fewer of us feel adequately prepared to share about our

NUMBER OF CONVERSATIONS ABOUT FAITH IN THE PAST YEAR

% AMONG U.S. SELF-IDENTIFIED CHRISTIANS



n=796 U.S. self-identified Christians, June 22–July 13, 2017.

FIGURE 1.2

Christian faith. Only 57 percent of us feel our church does a good job of training us to share our faith—compared to 77 percent of us twenty-five years ago. If fewer of us feel equipped to talk about our faith, it makes sense that we are talking about our faith less.

Our level of discomfort isn't helped by the fact that more of us than ever will avoid talking about our faith if we feel our non-Christian conversation partner would reject us. Almost half of us (44%) are going to avoid spiritual conversations if we feel we might be rejected. That's up from only 33 percent of us twenty-five years ago. We are simply less comfortable having spiritual conversations with non-Christians.

How equipped do you feel to talk about your Christian faith
(on a scale of 1-10)?

What does your church do to equip people to talk about the faith?
How successful would you say that equipping is (on a scale of 1-10)?

How willing are you personally to start a conversation if you feel your
conversation partner might reject you?

Finding 3. Our spiritual conversations mention Jesus and the Bible less. We are less comfortable talking with non-Christians about our faith, and when we do engage in spiritual conversations with non-Christians, what we talk about today is different. We are less likely to talk about the benefits of trusting Jesus: only half of us (50%) bring up how good it is to follow Jesus when

talking with non-Christians (78% of us were bringing that up twenty-five years ago). We are less likely to tell the story of how we ourselves began to trust Jesus (45% of us, down from 57%). We are also less likely to quote from the Bible (37% of us, down from 59%), and very few of us challenge others to defend their own beliefs (24%, down from 43%).

As you can see in figure 1.3, we also pray less before talking with non-Christians about our faith, and we are more likely to use the same basic approach and content no matter who it is we are talking with. Given the diminishment of some of these basic Christian points of content, we might surmise that as Christians we have become more committed to sharing our faith through our Christlike actions rather than relying as much on verbal witness. But our look in the mirror actually reveals otherwise. It turns out that fewer of us seek to share Jesus through our actions (65%) than our counterparts twenty-five years ago (77%).

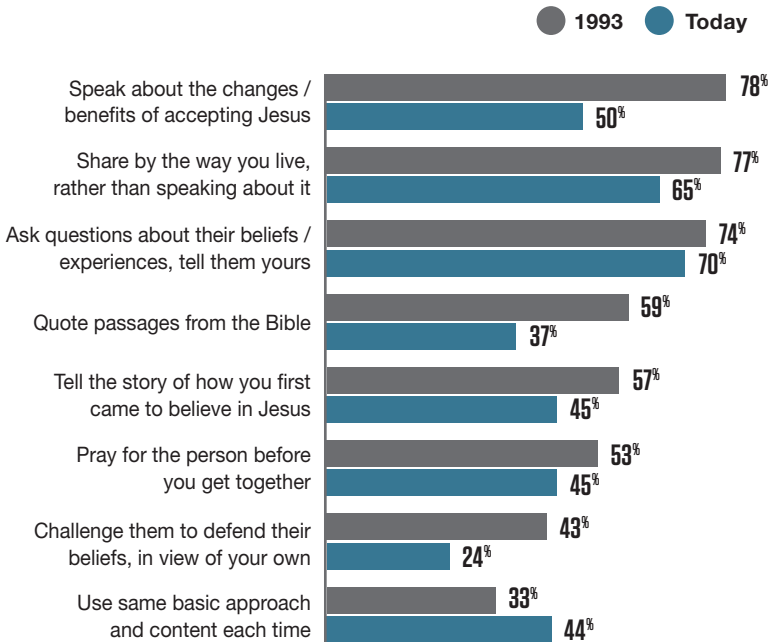
As you reflect back on the spiritual conversations you have had with non-Christians in the last year, describe what those conversations were like.

How comfortable are you talking about Jesus and your own life with Jesus? How comfortable are you talking about God's Word?

When conversations get around to Christianity do you have a "stump speech" that you tend to use every time, or are you more responsive and flexible based on who you are talking to?

THEN & NOW: CONTENT AND APPROACHES FOR SHARING FAITH

% AMONG CHRISTIANS WHO HAVE HAD A CONVERSATION ABOUT THEIR FAITH



1993: n=446 Christians who have had a conversation about their faith, August 14–20, 1993;

Today: n=796 Christians who have had a conversation about their faith, June 22–July 13, 2017.

FIGURE 1.3

Finding 4. Our approach to spiritual conversations mirrors our surrounding culture. In their research project, Lutheran Hour Ministries and Barna Group didn't just take a look at Christians' approach to spiritual conversations, they also did a survey of the general population. What they found was that we Christians are not so different from our surrounding culture.

The research revealed that only 8 percent of Americans talk about God, faith, religion, or spirituality even once a week. Only an additional 15 percent talk about spiritual matters even once a month. The average American says they only have about one spiritual conversation a year. Americans are talking about spiritual matters less, and the American church seems to be following suit.

THEN & NOW: CHURCH ATTENDANCE AMONG CHRISTIANS

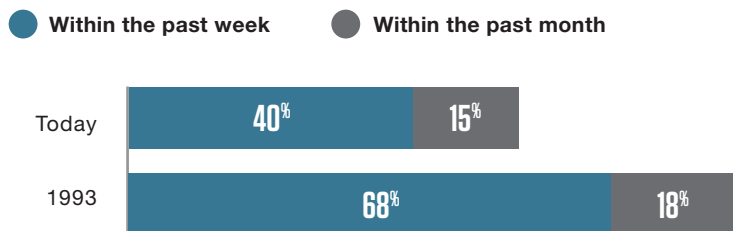


FIGURE 1.4

Or rather, American *Christians* seem to be following suit. The reality is fewer and fewer Christians are actually an active part of a local church. In 1993 if you were a Christian the odds were you had attended a local church within the last week or last month (86% of us). But as you can see on figure 1.4, today it's just about a coin flip. Only 55 percent of Christians attended a local church in the last week or last month. That's only half of us. Perhaps it should not be surprising then that we Christians are not so distinct from our surrounding culture.

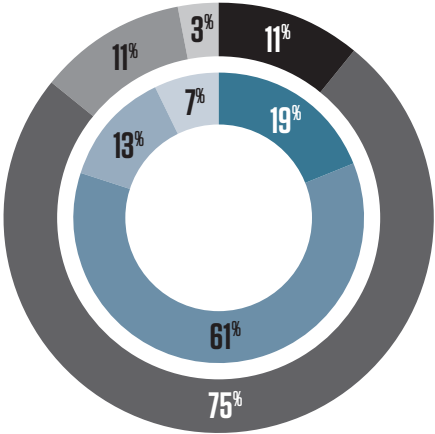
Where would you be on figure 1.4? How often are you getting together for church with other Christians?

If you were to characterize your distinctness on a scale of 1 (I am exactly like the surrounding culture) to 10 (I am nothing like my surrounding culture), what would your number be? What do you think might be an ideal target number?

Finding 5. We know spiritual conversations need to be initiated. The research has revealed that we are more convinced than ever that spiritual conversations with non-Christians don't just happen on their own. They take effort. Twenty-five years ago, most of us (75%) believed that opportunities to share our faith happened unexpectedly. Today only 61 percent think so. Perhaps this is why the number of

THEN & NOW: OPPORTUNITIES TO SHARE FAITH

% AMONG CHRISTIANS WHO HAVE HAD A CONVERSATION ABOUT THEIR FAITH



1993 Today

- I actively seek / create opportunities
- It usually happens unexpectedly
- About equal
- I don't know

1993: n=446 Christians who have had a conversation about their faith, August 14–20, 1993;

Today: n=796 Christians who have had a conversation about their faith, June 22–July 13, 2017.

FIGURE 1.5

us who actively seek opportunities to share our faith in a conversation has actually gone up slightly since 1993, as you can see on figure 1.5.

We also are more convinced than ever that genuine relationships (which take time and effort to initiate and nurture) are a prerequisite to effectively sharing our faith—47 percent of us, up from only 37 percent in 1993.

Taken together these numbers seem to suggest we are crystal clear that it takes effort on our part to help spiritual conversations occur.

Do you believe you need to build a genuine relationship before talking about your faith? Why or why not?

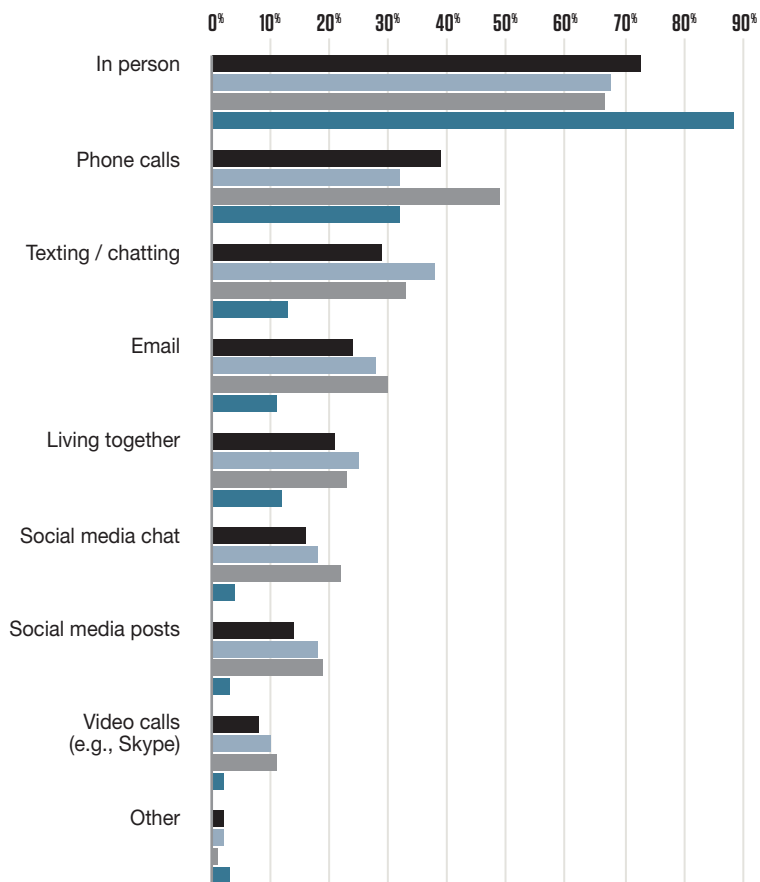
Describe the role you believe you have in initiating such relationships and conversations.

Finding 6. Our conversations increasingly have a digital element. You might be encouraged to know people are still experiencing big life changes because of spiritual conversations. This is what the research tells us. It also tells us that increasingly parts of those life-altering spiritual conversations are happening digitally: through email, text, social media, and so on. As you can see on figure 1.6, one's generation clearly plays a role in how likely it is that parts of your spiritual conversation happen digitally.³

INTERACTIONS THAT LED TO MY BIG LIFE CHANGE

% AMONG U.S. ADULTS WHO EXPERIENCED A BIG CHANGE AFTER A SPIRITUAL CONVERSATION; RESPONDENTS COULD SELECT ALL THAT APPLY

● All adults ● Millennials ● Gen X ● Boomers



n=374 U.S. adults who report a big change after a spiritual conversation, June 22–July 13, 2017.

FIGURE 1.6

It's not surprising then that we are beginning to see the digital landscape as a valid and perhaps important place to engage in and initiate spiritual conversations. While having a spiritual conversation "in person" is still by far our most common way of proceeding (see fig. 1.7), we are beginning to use digital means as well.

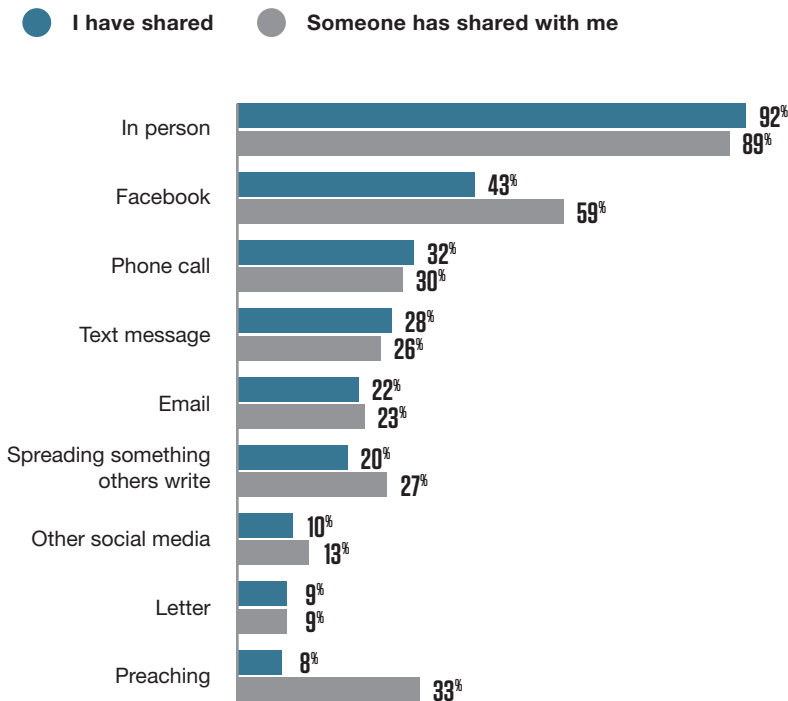
In some sense, the verdict is still out on the effects this new digital element of spiritual conversations is having. Some of us (58% of millennials, 64% of Gen Xers, and 39% of boomers) believe sharing our faith has become *easier* because of our new digital landscape. But many of us (64% of millennials, 60% of Gen Xers, and 45% of boomers) have sensed people are more likely to avoid real spiritual conversations because they are so busy with their devices.

Scholars who study our digital behavior note we tend to curate our appearances more on social media (less vulnerability) and have a tendency to be meaner on the digital landscape ("online disinhibition effect" is the technical term), two tendencies counter to fruitful witness.⁴

So, we're a bit conflicted on *how* the digital landscape is affecting witness, but it is undeniable that conversations in general (and spiritual conversations in specific) increasingly have some digital element. These specific findings have led Lutheran Hour Ministries to embark on new initiatives that

HOW I HAVE SHARED FAITH VIEWS AND HOW OTHERS HAVE SHARED FAITH VIEWS WITH ME

% AMONG U.S. ADULTS WHO HAVE HAD
A CONVERSATION ABOUT THEIR FAITH



"I have shared" n=840 U.S. adults, "someone else has shared" n=675 U.S. adults, June 22–July 13, 2017.

FIGURE 1.7

engage the digital mission field, including equipping Christians to explore and commit to some core biblical principles for digital witness.⁵

What generation do you fall into? How do you tend to view and relate to our new digital landscape?

What percentage of your relationships would you say has some digital communication involved in it? Do you think that percentage is changing over time? If so, how?

What experiences do you have sharing your faith digitally or seeing others do the same?

What do you think are the biggest opportunities in this new digital age? The biggest temptations?

Assessing the Fruits of Our Witness

Hopefully, this gaze into the mirror has helped you begin to honestly evaluate your own witness. Of the six findings that the latest research has revealed about our collective witness efforts, which would you say is most helpful in beginning to characterize your own personal witness? Rate each of these on a scale from 1 (doesn't describe me at all) to 10 (that's me):

- I have few spiritual conversations.
- I am uncomfortable with spiritual conversations.

- My spiritual conversations seldom mention Jesus or the Bible explicitly.
- I approach spiritual conversations more or less like my surrounding culture.
- I know spiritual conversations need to be initiated.
- My conversations increasingly have a digital element.

Given what these reflections have revealed, how would you characterize your own witness efforts? Barna's research characterizes most Christians in the United States as *reluctant conversationalists*. Luke characterized the Christians in Jerusalem as *devoted, active witnesses*. These are characterizations. If you had to characterize your own witness efforts in just one phrase or sentence, what would it be?

This may be a painful thing to do—in fact, you may find that question to be as confounding as I found that blank piece of paper sitting at that gray metal desk back in Colorado. That question may make all sorts of defensive justifications spring up within you. But answering that question is an important step. Remember, it is possible something delightful may exist on the other side of that question.

Luke didn't merely characterize the state of the church's witness; he was also careful to assess and even quantify the resulting fruits. So, what fruit comes from your witness?

In this regard, the research we've been looking at can't help too much. The study was more focused on Christian activities (like the verbs from Luke's snapshots in Acts) than quantifying the fruits (like Luke's numeric observations in Acts).

But even a cursory view of the church in the United States shows we are not, on the whole, in a season of multiplication. We do have beautiful but rare occurrences of *multiplication*. We are also experiencing wonderful *addition* in some parts of the church. But on the whole, we're experiencing steady *subtraction*. How about you? What type of fruit have you seen as a result of your witness faithfulness? That winter day back in Colorado I had to admit I wasn't seeing much fruit.

These are, of course, very difficult questions. The questions become theologically tricky (doesn't God bring the fruit, not us?) as well as technically tricky (how exactly do you count making a disciple?), but this trickiness did not stop Luke from closely examining what was going on, and it should not stop us either. It is true that God brings the fruit, but he has called us to labor in his field, and how can we do that if we don't closely examine that field and even our own work habits as we prepare to enter the field? In fact, as Doug Schaupp, Val Gordon, and I explored in *Breaking the Huddle: How Your Community Can Grow Its Witness*, this honest self-evaluation turns out to be a key first step in allowing God to grow you in your witness.

It really is possible to experience the delight of spiritual conversations. It really is possible to have beautiful feet. But the first step is getting honest about your status quo.

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