APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY EVANGELISM

Bob Robinson

The way we've been sharing the gospel with people is through the means of telling them they are sinners in need of a savior. While this is very true for all of us, it is not the best way, all the time, for sharing the gospel.

What if we reframe the gospel presentation around the fact that the gospel is 'good news?' What if we approached people in a way that will open them up to the grace and love and hope found in Jesus Christ rather than immediately putting them on the defensive?

In the following posts, I am going to apply a new way of interacting with people (especially in the business world), called 'Appreciative Inquiry,' to the task of evangelism. This paradigm shift has a lot of potential for evangelism.

Think about sharing the gospel with someone in a paradigm that embraces these two words:

- **Ap-pre'ci-ate**, v., 1. valuing; the act of recognizing the best in people or the world around us; affirming past and present strengths, successes, and potentials; to perceive those things that give life (health, vitality, excellence) to living systems 2. to increase in value, e.g. the economy has appreciated in value. Synonyms: VALUING, PRIZING, ESTEEMING, and HONORING.
- **In-quire'**, v., 1. the act of exploration and discovery. 2. To ask questions; to be open to seeing new potentials and possibilities. Synonyms: DISCOVERY, SEARCH, and SYSTEMATIC EXPLORATION, STUDY.

What if we saw people not primarily as sinners, but as image-bearers? How would our evangelism look different if we appreciated all people, affirming their past and present strengths and successes? What if we valued people as human beings first rather than as merely possible candidates to become Christians? What if instead of seeing people as inherently flawed that we saw them with inherent potential?

And...

What if our interaction with people helped them explore and discover those potentialities and possibilities that God wants to flourish in them? What if we could introduce them to the Redeemer of all things, Jesus Christ, who wants to restore us to our image-bearing glory? What if we framed the gospel around a desired destiny rather than a defeatist depravity?

This 'Appreciative Inquiry Evangelism' (AIE) can revolutionize the way we share the gospel in a postmodern culture.

Our Theological Grid Determines Our Evangelism

The way we do evangelism is based on our theological grid.

THEOLOGICAL GRID #1:
Every human being is thoroughly depraved. Each person is in rebellion against God, in enmity with God, and deserves the wrath of God. Everything he or she does is tainted by sin, and nothing he or she does pleases God. A person's rightful destiny is Hell. This world is so fallen that it is destined to be destroyed. The only hope for each person is to realize his or her sinfulness and turn to God for forgiveness, believing in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins. When a person does this, he or she is assured to escape from this fallen world, be spared of Hell, and guaranteed a place in heaven with God.

Most of these theological assertions are true (though I think that this world is *not* destined for destruction but rather for renewal, and that the destiny of Christians is not to escape this world, but for God to renew the earth so that He will dwell *here* with us).

I'm not questioning these theological assertions as much as I am questioning their use in evangelism in our postmodern 21st Century culture. If we approach people with this theological grid guiding our methods, we inevitably feel compelled to explain to them this theological grid. We have called this 'proclamation of the gospel.'

If we approach people with this theological grid, we will get certain results. Some will repent of their sins and confess that they need Jesus Christ as Savior. Others will see our religion as judgmental. Still others will react negatively and see our religion as disconnected with the real lives that they are trying to live. Ask yourself, *How do I react when somebody confronts me with the worst of who I am and seeks to force me to admit it? What do I think of people who believe that their calling is to point out other people's faults so that they can fix them?*

The evangelism method that we've been using tells people they have problems. The 'good news' we proclaim is based first on the 'bad news' that they are a mess. Ask yourself, Is there a problem with only focusing on the problems?

Now, watch as we start with a different theological grid...

THEOLOGICAL GRID #2:
Every human being is created in the image of God. Each person is a special creation of God, unique in his or her potential contribution to the rest of God's creation. Each person is inter-relational, meant to be connected with God and with other people, for the good of the creation. God's greatest desire is to bring out the very best in each person. This very best is intrinsically connected with the work of Jesus Christ in reconciling each person in deep relationship with God and reconnecting each person to others in myriad networks of authentic relationships. God is in the process of redeeming all of Creation for his glory. A person's best possible destiny is to live glorified on a renewed and redeemed earth. God is already at work in people's lives to pull them into the potential he has for them in the context of redeemed relationships. In order for people to move into their glorious destiny, a major change must occur to the status quo of that person's life and to the common assumptions this person has about how life works. The person needs to yield to God's re-creation of him or her into somebody very new and very different. That re-creation is key to the transformation of the world.

I believe that all of these theological assertions are also true.

So, what if my evangelistic conversations were framed around exploring and discovering what God is already doing in this person? What if I started with asking appreciative questions that reframes the conversation so that we can approach the positive change that God wants to accomplish in a person?

- What is your vision of what a better world would be?
- What do you think is your unique contribution to the world, to your friendships, in your workplace, to your family?
- When have you experienced being closer to what you think God wants you to be?
- What do you envision as your purpose in God's desires for the world?
- What do you think is your current destiny, and what do you think God wants it to be?

Using Appreciative Inquiry to Discern Structure and Direction

Most evangelistic tools start with the theological grid that begins with the Fall and ends with Redemption. This is what Mike Metzger, of The Clapham Institute calls a 'Two Chapter Gospel.' It leaves out chapter one (Creation) and chapter four (Restoration or Consummation). Appreciative Inquiry Evangelism seeks to discern, through positive conversation, those two missing chapters in a person's life.

In order to honor the fullness of the 'Four Chapter Gospel,' our evangelism needs to move beyond a truncated gospel proclamation of just Fall and Salvation. Our gospel is larger than that, so our evangelism needs to be larger than that as well. We must include all four chapters of God's story of Recreation. Those chapters are:

Creation God created all things and called them 'very good.' This created cosmos, therefore, has a creational structure or order to it. This is the Shalom peace that God originally intended. Cornelius Plantinga writes that Shalom is 'the webbing together of God, humans, and all creation in justice, fulfillment, and delight…Shalom means universal *flourishing, wholeness and delight* – a rich state of affairs in which natural needs are satisfied and natural gifts fruitfully employed, a state of affairs that inspires joyful wonder as its Creator and Savior opens doors and welcomes the creatures in whom he delights. Shalom, in other words, is the way things ought to be.' (Not the Way it's Supposed to Be, Eerdmans, 1995, p. 10) Our evangelism must start here: exploring with people how they understand how things ought to be, helping a person discern their creational image-bearing goodness hidden in the fallenness of their depravity, affirming that God has created them as special human beings with much to offer.

Fall We now all experience the perversion, pollution, and disintegration of Shalom due to humanity's rebellion against the intended purposes of God. Because of the Fall, the creational structure or order of all things has been redirected in 'a sinful deviation from that structural ordinance' (Albert Wolters, Creation Regained, Eerdmans, 1985, 2005 p. 88). Our evangelism must help a person understand and own their own culpability in this perversion of God's intended purposes for his creation.

Redemption In God's grace, he has determined to redeem human beings, in order to restore the entire cosmos. God's grace is restoring all of nature, 'renewing conformity to God's creational order' (Wolters, p. 88). Therefore the redemption of people must be seen as the central part of God's intention to redeem all of creation. Our evangelism often conveys that God wants to save people *from* the created structure, when in fact God wants to save people from the perverse *deviation of God's structural order*. He also wants to create a people who will be instrumental in redirecting this sinful deviation toward his intended purposes. As we read in Colossians,

> He (Jesus Christ) is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross. (Colossians 1:15-20)

Our evangelism, then, must not be about promises of escape from this earthly experience into some heavenly bliss. It must be about joining in with God's intended purposes for his creation. God is calling a people to be his redemptive agents in the world today.

Restoration We all know how transformative it is to have a clear vision of the way things can be. This is true of evangelism as well. Part of our call to reach people is to call them into the hope of the eschatological future God holds for us all. As we see the way things will be, it calls us to, as much as we possibly can, bring that future into the present in small and large ways. Our evangelistic message of hope, therefore, is not a spiritual life divorced of the material world around us (as Greek Platonist philosophy would have us believe), but the message of hope for this created world, the world that God called 'very good' will be restored, and we will have a place in it.

Therefore, our Apprecitative Inquires with people will help them discern 'structure' (that is, the way things were meant to be, 'Shalom') and 'direction' (the way things have been perverted, polluted, or disintegrated). But it does not end there. We ask people to join in God's 'redirection' (that is, the redemption of all things back on the course God intends for them) and we help them envision a world where everything is the way God intends it to be.

As Albert Wolters writes, 'What was *formed* in creation has been historically deformed by sin and must be reformed in Christ.' (Creation Regained, Eerdmans, p. 91). We are inviting people into the reformation of all things.

Appreciative Inquiry – an Overview

Appreciative Inquiry was designed by David Cooperrider and Suresh Srivastva in 1980 at Case Western University. Cooperrider studied the Cleveland Clinic's organizational behavior by focusing just on the life-centric factors contributing to the highly effective functioning of the clinic when it was at its best. Instead of dealing primarily with problems and seeking solutions to these problems in the organizational life of this institution, the focus was on that which could be appreciated and life-giving. The Cleveland Clinic became the first large site where a conscious decision to use an inquiry focusing on life-giving factors formed the basis for an organizational analysis.

Cooperrider and Srivastva define Appreciative Inquiry (AI) as a strategy for intentional change that identifies the best of 'what is' to pursue dreams and possibilities of 'what could be.' This is done in the context of interactive collaborative relationships; a cooperative search for the strengths, passions and life-giving forces that are found within every system and that hold potential for inspired, positive change. This has become a revolutionary way of managing organizations and people.

AI is a way of collecting and celebrating 'good news stories' of a community; these stories serve to enhance cultural identity, spirit and vision. Through these positive stories, the inquiry moves that community to identifying the best and highest qualities in organizational systems, particular situations, and in other human beings. AI focuses on an appreciation for the 'mystery of being' (a term coined by Christian philosopher Gabriel Marcel) and a 'reverence for life' (a term borrowed directly from Albert Schweitzer).

As I've studied this new way of moving organizations toward positive change, I am reminded that *the gospel* is about positive change. The 'good news' is the story of how God is redeeming his creation, starting with the restoration of the image of God in humanity. The strength of Appreciative Inquiry is found in its determination to find that which gives life. The focus is on identifying potential and bringing out the best in people.

I've been in search of a new way of doing outreach that affirms the image of God in people, encouraging them to submit to God's grace of restoring this imago Dei through Jesus Christ.

I have found that asking positive questions that draw out the best in people and then pointing people to the glorious destiny of creation that God intends opens and encourages gospel-centered conversations more than solely negative-based proclamation about sin and judgment.

Perhaps AI is a tool we can learn from toward this end.

How to Have an Appreciative Inquiry Evangelistic Conversation

The strength of Appreciative Inquiry is that it focuses on positives rather than negatives in the pursuit of change.

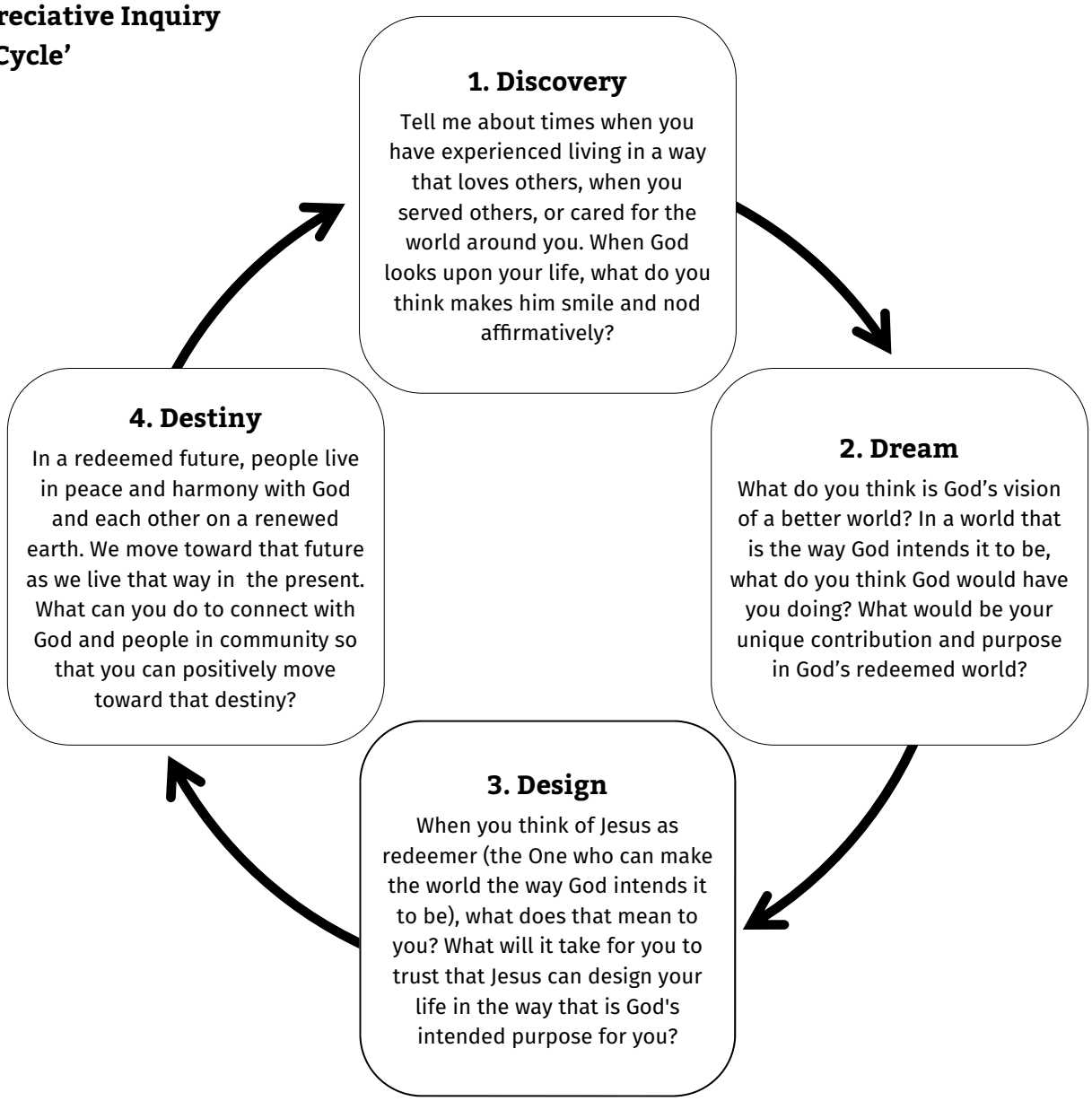
The presumption is that, yes, there needs to be change. Things are not the way they should be. By focusing in on things we can affirm, we are *not* denying the Fall. Instead, we are shifting our sole focus from the Fall to Creation.

Theologically, when we practice affirmative inquiry, we are saying that the essential nature of humanity is not our depravity but our being created in the image of God. For far too long, our evangelism efforts have started with our falleness, our sinfulness. While our sinfulness is certainly true, it is not the beginning of the story of humanity; the story begins with our uniqueness as image-bearers. The story begins with telling us about God's glorious intention for humanity: that we would shine forth His glory as we reflect His loving essence.

However, we must be honest while we do this. The goal is *not* to gloss over where we fall short of that glory. The goal is *not* mindless happy talk. We can't ignore the real problems in the world and in our own personal lives. The goal is to *approach these issues from the other side*, the side that says God is willing and able to empower those who yield to Him to grow spiritually. This spiritual growth is called 'conversion' or 'transformation' or 'redemption' or even 'salvation.'

The goal of evangelistic conversations, then, shifts from (initially and primarily) laying guilt on someone about how awful they are. The goal, instead, is to affirm how God has uniquely created, has been calling, and has been molding each person to be what God wants them to be. There are four stages of Appreciative Inquiry.

Appreciative Inquiry '4D Cycle'



Here I offer one suggestion as to how to lead a person through AI in an evangelistic conversation. You can tailor these steps if you feel you need to highlight another aspect of the gospel with a particular person or group.

1. DISCOVERY

We help them discover positive things that would glorify God if put to the right use. We steer them away from selfish ambition and toward the things that serve others and cares for the Creation. We begin our inquiry by saying, 'Tell me about times when you have experienced living in a way that loves others - when you served others, or cared for the world around you.' 'When God looks upon your life, what do you think makes him smile and nod affirmatively?'

2. DREAM

Once we do that, we can help the person dream about what a future could look like if they yielded to God so that they can be all that God intends them to be. As we ask people about what they see as their future, we communicate to them that God is about hope. We move a person into an eschatological understanding of God that is not primarily about Armageddon and being 'Left Behind,' but into a positive vision of the way God intends things to be. We continue our inquiry by asking, 'What do you think is God's vision of a better world?' 'In a world that is the way God intends it to be, what do you think God would have you doing?' 'What would be your unique contribution and purpose in God's redeemed world?'

3. DESIGN

This is where the rubber meets the road. Here we need to help the person understand God's way of designing this future vision. We continue through affirmative inquiry to do so, by asking, 'The Bible says that Jesus Christ is the Redeemer of all things. When you think of Jesus as redeemer (as the One who can make the world the way God intends it to be), what does that mean to you?' 'When you think of the way Jesus lived, died, and resurrected, what does that say about the love of God and his intentions about the world?' The goal here is to help a person come to their own realization (by the conviction of the Holy Spirit) that the world and themselves are not what God intends and that Jesus is the way to make things right. The design phase only is worthwhile if the person yields to God's design for their lives (through their faith in the person of Jesus Christ). A person's personal design for life will fall short of God's glorious intentions without the Lordship of Christ. The goal is to reframe a person's understanding – they will most likely think of Christianity as an institutional killjoy. While that often is the case(!), the person of Jesus Christ came that we would have life in abundance. Jesus' resurrection assures us that God is working toward renewing the creation. Jesus needs to be seen as the person's personal guide into God's good intentions and dreams for them and the world, instead of a religion that snuffs out dreams. We need to ask, 'What will it take for you to trust that Jesus can design your life in the way that is God's intended purpose for you?' The key issue here is trust. For many people, it is not an easy thing to trust in God. We must gently help them to open their hearts to God. They must decide that their personal design for life is contrary to God's design and turn toward God's design instead (this is repentance).

4. DESTINY

Real change means sustainability. The Destiny Phase of AI suggests that what is absolutely needed is a network-like structure that creates a convergence zone for people to empower one another – to connect, cooperate, and co-create. We are not converted as individuals; we need to be converted into a community that walks with us toward a shared destiny, one in which we all contribute and which needs others in order to arrive at it. This is the beauty of the body of Christ. The eschatological future is not about persons experiencing individualistic bliss in some ethereal heavenly realm. The eschatological future is where God and His People (plural) all live in Shalom harmony on a redeemed earth. This destiny is arrived at in community. So, we ask, 'In a redeemed future, people live in peace and harmony with God and each other on a renewed earth. We move toward that future as we live that way in the present. What can you do to connect with God and people in community so that you can positively move toward that destiny?'

Bob Robinson serves the CCO as Area Director for Northern Ohio. He supervises and mentors campus workers placed strategically on university and college campuses. He is also an integral part of the CCO's team that trains campus ministry staff in innovative ways to reach a new generation for Christ. Bob has extensive experience in developing visionary ministries and is always rethinking innovative ways to produce Christian spiritual formation. His website and blog, vanguardchurch.com, has become a leading resource for innovative ways to reach out to a postmodern generation.