



"For the purpose of this book," writes Martha Grace Reese, "evangelism is anything you do to help another person move closer to a relationship with God, or into Christian community." With those freeing words, the Gospel already feels a little more unbound, and likely so will anyone who reads *Unbinding the Gospel*. Throughout this engaging book, the author relies on a combination of creativity, humor, straight talk, keen organization, and most importantly, the power of prayer to help us reframe what it means to be faithful disciples through evangelism. She reveals the heart of what it means to share good news with others.

Based on a four-year evangelism research project that included 150 churches and more than 1,000 interviews, the book is written in three parts. The first examines the state of evangelism in mainline churches today, the second provides examples of "great churches sharing their faith,"

and the third explores what Reese describes as "the possibilities God has in mind for you." Each part carries a helpful reminder of where one is in the "map" of the book, imparting Reese's clear sense of direction and purpose in writing the book in the first place.

Though an excellent and practical study book for an evangelism team, it would be a shame if this volume gets pigeonholed as one more book about technique. In the end, Reese helps us take a long, hard look at what it really means to *be church*— to be the living, breathing, effective

Body of Christ in the midst of a world so desperately in need of the kind of peace Christ gives.

The overall feeling one gets from reading *Unbinding the Gospel* is that of having a real heart to heart conversation with the author, one that is long overdue. Her delightfully conversational style is so punctuated with exclamation points that from time to time I had the feeling I was reading Mark's gospel. But her sense of urgency is well-founded, as she illustrates. Citing sobering statistics, such as the fact that "in 2000 there were only half as many mainline Protestants as there were 40 years before," Reese prepares us for a hard landing by putting the

numerical losses in human terms. In the next decades, she says, millions more will join the ranks of those who have never attended a church. "They won't have memories of a Christian grandmother, father, or next-door neighbor. The thought of 'going back to church' when they're in trouble will never occur to them, because they have never been inside a church building in the first place. For them, a church is an alien, possibly intimidating place—not a cradle of comfort and hope."

But if you think this is another shrill warning of the ecclesial sky falling, it's anything but. With a great deal of optimism, hope, and honesty, Reese helps us sort through the tangle of issues surrounding

evangelism and distills one poignant question for us to ponder: What difference does it make in your own life that you are a Christian? Reese believes this is the pivotal question for those who follow the Risen Christ and is the foundation on which any evangelistic efforts must stand. For, if we don't know or can't articulate what is profound and transformational about Jesus in our own lives, how and, more crucially, *why* would we tell others?

Reese has written a deeply insightful book that isn't simply another set of pages to chew on and place on one's bookshelf with the afterthought, "Well, now, that was interesting." Instead, what one finds in *Unbinding the Gospel* is a spiritual workbook, a comprehensive manual for those wanting to begin or jump-start the intentional work of equipping people to tell the gospel news in word and in deed.

Evaluative criteria, practical measuring sticks, and provocative questions at the end of each chapter draw us deeper into the serious consideration of becoming bold witnesses. With clarity and sound theological grounding, we are invited into a grand adventure, one in which, Reese promises, the Spirit will be faithful.

Reese has called upon her parish ministry experience as well as her work as a lawyer, consultant, and coach to produce what very well could be a watershed book for mainline Protestantism. "The holy is encased in the pragmatic," she writes regarding strategies for evangelism. It's not a bad description of her wonderful book, either. Readers will come away feeling nourished and inspired.

Rev. Rebecca Gummere

Grace Lutheran Church Boone, North Carolina

36

CONGREGATIONS . SUMMER 2007