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## Book Review: The Art of Personal Evangelism by Will McRaney

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## **The Art of Personal Evangelism**

**Reviewed by Bob Whitesel**

*McRaney, Jr., Will. The Art of Personal Evangelism. Broadman and Holman, 2003*

In my library, books tend to fall into three categories. First there are those that are read quickly and lightly, which reside on the uppermost shelves, rarely reread or consulted. A second category contains volumes of sizeable benefit, but which need not be consulted repeatedly. Thus, they reside somewhere above eye level, though still accessible.

The final category are those tomes whose content speak so loudly and significantly to me that they cry out to be within daily reach. Upon these shelves reside books that have had profound effect upon my ministry, understandings and prognostications. Here reside volumes by McGavran, Wagner, Gibbs, Kent R. and George Hunter, McIntosh, and both Arnsees. This week, a new volume has been placed upon this mantel. It is one of the most current and comprehensive volumes I have encountered on personally sharing your faith. It is titled, "The Art of Personal Evangelism," (Broadman and Holman, 2003) and it is penned by New Orleans Baptist Seminary professor, Will McRaney, Jr.

To ensure this volume did not become too unwieldy, McRaney wisely decided to divide his 268 page book into three sections, each tackling an essential element of personal evangelism.

In the first section (Chapters 1 – 3), McRaney investigates the theological base for personal evangelism. He begins, and rightly so, with the fundamental involvement of the Holy Spirit. McRaney understands, as Michael Green so well put in "I Believe in the Holy Spirit" that "the Comforter comes not in order to allow men to be comfortable, but to make them missionaries" (Eerd-

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mans, 1975). McRaney delves into the motivation and stimulus behind those who would serve as conduits for this message. And McRaney addresses how to clearly communicate the sometimes cryptic theological basics of our message. This section provides an elaborate, but not overwhelming overview of the theological and practical essence of our task. While some might question why McRaney did not go into the depth that some earlier tomes have attempted, it is this reviewer's opinion that McRaney's theological synopsis makes his work more palatable and thus potentially more consulted.

In a second section (Chapters 4 – 6), McRaney tackles the delicate task of interrelating what Eddie Gibbs calls the “medium and message.” The medium is that through which the message travels (be it a person, a culture, a tool, or a predilection). The caveat is to continually be adapting and modernizing the medium without weakening or adulterating the message. Though this section is a good introduction, more depth might be sought by some. If this is the case, the chapter on “Medium and Message” in Eddie Gibbs' book “I Believe in Church Growth” (Eerdmans, 1981) is still without equal. Nevertheless, McRaney should be again commended for keeping his book from reaching a length where it might lose its popular appeal.

The third section is somewhat of a surprise, since it is contained within a book which up to this point seems focused on more theoretical and philosophical matters. This final section (Chapters 7 – 9 and the appendixes) offers an abundance of practical aids for personal evangelism. I found this section not only refreshing, but befitting. After completing the earlier chapters, I found myself wanting pragmatic strategies to apply the principles and ethos McRaney had so keenly developed in the first six chapters. Here is where McRaney shines. He offers a nice compendium of practical strategies. He examines the pitfalls and potentials of personal evangelism, each time responding with valuable and effective guidance.

In addition, McRaney's understanding of how to share the Good News to a post-modern culture is especially valuable. One of my favorite quotes is by George Hunter in his book “The Celtic Way of Evangelism: How Christianity Can Reach the West... Again. Hunter warned, “the typical church ignores two populations...: the people who aren't ‘refined’ enough to feel comfortable with us, and the people who are too ‘out of control’ for us to feel comfortable with them!” (Abingdon Press, 2000). McRaney tackles this task head on, offering dozens of good strategies to breach those same cultural walls that St. Patrick battled in the late fourth century. McRaney's third section alone can

provide a suitable point of departure for training courses in outreach.

Hitherto, personal evangelism had seemed to have become the neglected step-child of the church growth movement. Yet, it was not always so. In "Understanding Church Growth" McGavran waxed almost poetic to describe the task, for in his mind "there is no way for a Christian to avoid open search for the lost. The real Christian candidly avows that he desires men to become fellow disciples and is bend all his efforts to that end. Plain honesty requires it." (p. 34). McRaney clearly understands this central nature of personal evangelism in the philosophy and methodology of McGavran. McRaney has said that McGavran saw personal evangelism as a tool that "results in indigenous churches to all people of the world" (ASCG annual meeting, Louisiana, 11-07-03). Thus, McRaney builds upon McGavran's base in the first two sections, but then embarks into practical realms where clearly defined strategies can help churches inculcate and instigate personal witnessing within their local context.

Where "The Personal Art of Evangelism" may be weak is in its exploration of what C. Peter Wagner and John Wimber called "power evangelism." Wimber best defined power evangelism in "Church Growth State of the Art" (Tyndale House, 1988; Wagner, Arn and Towns editors), where he called it "a presentation of the gospel that is rational but also transcends the rational. The explanation of the gospel comes with a demonstration of God's power through signs and wonders. It is a spontaneous, Spirit-inspired, empowered presentation of the gospel. It is usually preceded and undergirded by supernatural demonstrations of God's presence." Perhaps because McRaney's immediate audience is churches and denominations that might be uncomfortable with modern manifestations of such phenomenal episodes, the topic is somewhat overlooked. Perhaps purchasing this book along with Wagner's, "Spreading the Fire: A New Look at Acts, God's Training Manual for Every Christian" (Regal Books, 1994) would make this investigation of personal evangelism more comprehensive.

Nevertheless, this book's shortcomings are few. "The Art of Personal Evangelism" is just that, an artfully drawn picture of the depth and breadth of sharing our relationship with Jesus. Yes, that shelf within arms-reach of my desk remains a sill set apart from all others. And now it has another volume, for "The Art of Personal Evangelism" joins in my library the realm of tomes both treasured and sought.

Reviewer

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