

“I love this book! It’s full of biblical insight and practical wisdom on evangelism but, far from just filling the head with instruction, it warms the heart with passion. Richard not only reminds us of why and how we should share our faith but also inspires us to get on with it.”

VAUGHAN ROBERTS, *Rector of St Ebbe’s Church, Oxford,
and Director of the Proclamation Trust*

“This is the most readable and accessible commentary on the book of Jonah. The story of the prophet is filled with surprising twists and turns—and loads of lessons for us today. Richard is a trustworthy and insightful guide to the readers of this book. It will be a boon to preachers and listeners alike.”

TIMOTHY KELLER, *Pastor Emeritus,
Redeemer Presbyterian Church, New York City*

“Some expositions of Jonah almost entirely miss God’s evangelistic compassion—infinately stronger than that of the prophet Jonah. Not so this popular exposition, written with verve and panache by Richard Coekin. Coekin thinks through what it means to lose our reluctance to be evangelists. Above all, he reminds us of what Jonah rediscovered: ‘Salvation comes from the LORD!’”

D.A. CARSON, *Research Professor of New Testament at Trinity
Evangelical Divinity School, and President of The Gospel Coalition*

“This gripping book is packed with compelling reasons and practical encouragement to spread the good news of Jesus Christ. It both inspires and equips the ‘reluctant evangelist’.”

WILLIAM TAYLOR, *Rector of St Helen’s Bishopsgate, London*

“I have thoroughly enjoyed the deft exegetical touch displayed in ‘The Reluctant Evangelist’. It’s accurate and light, faithful and pertinent. I thoroughly recommend it!”

STEVE TIMMIS, *CEO, Acts 29*

“As Christians we know that we ought to be passionately committed to evangelism, but many of us are reluctant to share the good news about Jesus with others. Richard Coekin rightly identifies that our main problem is a lack of motivation. Rather than inducing unproductive and discouraging guilt, in this compelling short book he expounds the well-known story of Jonah, and urges us to see the compassionate character and sovereign saving purposes of God. Written with clarity and directness, and packed with personal testimonies and engaging illustrations, no one who reads this book will fail to be inspired, encouraged and empowered to overcome their reluctance in personal evangelism. Many churches would be greatly blessed if the whole congregation were to read the book together, and it is an ideal resource for discussion in small groups, perhaps taking a chapter each week for reflection and prayer.”

JOHN STEVENS, *National Director,
Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches (FIEC)*

RICHARD COEKIN

The
Reluctant
Evangelist

MOVING FROM *CAN'T* AND *DON'T*
TO *CAN* AND *DO*

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*For my dad, John, with love and everlasting gratitude
because, like Caleb, you
“followed the LORD my God wholeheartedly”
and encouraged your family to do the same
Joshua 14 v 8*

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PREFACE

This is a book for *reluctant evangelists*. I mean it's for Christians who generally find it difficult to engage in evangelistic conversations, daunting to consider joining a church plant, and utterly terrifying to engage in cross-cultural mission.

Indeed, this is a book by someone who has been a reluctant evangelist. Some years ago, before I was a pastor and church-planter, I managed to invite a friend I'd known at university called Rachel to come to a guest service at my church in London. When I phoned to remind her to come, her flatmate Sarah explained that Rachel had gone away for the weekend with friends. "Why, what were you inviting her to?" she asked. "Oh, nothing much," I replied, feeling embarrassed. "No really," she insisted. "Where were you going?" "Oh, just church—don't worry about it," I mumbled. "Oh great—can I come instead?" said Sarah brightly.

So she came to church that Sunday, and when the evangelist finished preaching, he asked if those who wanted to become Christians would come to the front of the congregation to be prayed for. To my complete shock, Sarah stood up and walked down to the front to become a Christian! My pathetic evangelistic reluctance was brutally exposed that night.

For some of us, our reluctance is *temperamental*—perhaps we’re a little shy, reserved or introverted in character, and evangelism feels frightening.

For others of us, our reluctance is *cultural*—we’ve been raised to keep to ourselves, and evangelism seems rude.

For many of us, our reluctance is *theological*—we’re just not sure if God wants all Christians to engage in mission, especially if we lack the gifts or “calling” in evangelism that others seem to have.

For most of us, our reluctance is *motivational*—we have so many responsibilities and problems to face that we’re not persuaded that evangelism should really be an urgent priority for us right now.

But evangelism is not *optional* for Christians. When our Lord Jesus first called his disciples he said, “Come, follow me, and I will send you out to fish for people”; later he warned them, “If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his Father’s glory”; and when he left them he commanded, “Go and make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 4 v 19; Mark 8 v 38; Matthew 28 v 19). So his apostle Peter insists, “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have” (1 Peter 3 v 15).

Thankfully, our reluctance is *treatable*—we really don’t have to find evangelism so hard or frightening. For, as we shall see, Almighty God is a compassionate Evangelist, and his Spirit can transform us by his word to share his passion for mission. He really can teach us to find personal evangelism, church-planting and cross-cultural mission exciting—indeed the fulfilling purpose of our lives.

So *The Reluctant Evangelist* aims to help you conquer your reluctance—to follow Jesus unashamedly in making disciples for him, ready to explain your hope in language your family, friends and colleagues can understand.

We will explore God’s basic mission principles as they are beautifully clarified in the gripping memoirs of the prophet Jonah, read in the light of Christ and the rest of the Bible. In our church and church-planting movement in London, we’ve discovered that all the foundational principles we’ve needed are to be found here; because Jonah is not just a children’s bedtime story about a big fish (the whale is a “red herring” anyway!). Rather, Jonah is a serious mission-training manual from our God, the compassionate Evangelist, who has not only delayed the end of the world but sent his beloved Son to die on a cross, in order to evangelise the nations.

As we shall discover, effective evangelism begins with understanding the character and purposes of the living and loving God revealed in Jonah and fulfilled in Christ. It’s only when we learn to *trust* his awesome *power* (chapter 1), *experience* his sovereign *grace* (chapter 2), *fear* his coming *judgment* (chapter 3) and *share* his gut-wrenching *compassion* (chapter 4)—as this is perfectly revealed in Jesus, the divine Evangelist—that our hearts will sing with the melodic line of Jonah, “Salvation comes from the LORD” (Jonah 2 v 9). And when his Holy Spirit fills our hearts with *his* love, our lives will start to bubble up with the evangelistic enterprise that our friends, colleagues, communities and cities so desperately need.

The Reluctant Evangelist is not trying to sell you yet another “silver bullet” outreach strategy because I don’t think that is what most of us need (though I hope some of the missional

ideas will be helpful). Instead, I pray that this book will help you access the fundamental and thrilling evangelistic principles of Jonah, to understand how God is reaching unbelievers everywhere today.

For if God can use someone as reluctant and selfish as Jonah to accomplish the greatest urban revival in Bible history (when the whole pagan city of Nineveh turned to the LORD), he can use us too.

1 OUR LORD CAN SAVE ANYONE

Read the whole of Jonah quickly to get the story

Think for a moment about the city or town where you live. Do you think anyone who lives there is beyond salvation through faith in Christ Jesus? Do you think some people are so immoral or evil that God doesn't want to save them? Or that some people are so indoctrinated by Islam or atheism that they cannot be reached by our Lord? Or has someone you care about proved so apathetic, resistant or hostile to the gospel that you have nearly given up hope of them ever becoming a Christian?

Well, Almighty God once dramatically demonstrated that he can save anyone by saving *a whole city* of violent, idolatrous pagans in one go! The Old Testament book of Jonah describes how our Lord once brought the entire 8th-century-BC city of Nineveh to salvation—through a very reluctant evangelist proclaiming his gospel. Now, when Christians think about the towns and cities where we live today, and about the unbelievers

we care most about, we will want to know more about how that happened.

For example, London, where I have lived with my family for the last twenty-three years, is certainly an exciting, cosmopolitan city with great influence in our nation and the world. Ever since the 2012 Olympics, the Mori Global Power City Index has consistently ranked London as “Number 1 City in the World”, leaving New York, Tokyo and Paris trailing in its wake. It’s a political, economic and cultural powerhouse. And it is home to 8.8 million people from a rich diversity of backgrounds. For the nations have come to London for education, business and a better life. Less than half of its population are now white British: 600,000 people state their ethnicity as Indian, 400,000 are French, there are 230,000 each from Pakistan and Bangladesh, indeterminate hundreds of thousands from Poland, Romania and Bulgaria, and 80,000 Somalis. And the city is constantly churning with a net annual growth of about 100,000. London is a multicultural global city and I love it.

But this city is also an emerging spiritual catastrophe. When the 2011 National Census asked, “What religion are you?”, 48% of Londoners replied “Christian”. However, the Times YouGov survey of 2015 revealed that only 55% of them believe in God. The London City Mission census of 2012 revealed that only 9% of Londoners are attending church on Sunday—and only 5.4% are attending evangelical churches. (UK church 2010-2020 Statistics, Peter Brierley, Brierley consultancy, ADBC publishing 2014, page 61, section 12.1)

I can only conclude from these figures that more than 90% of Londoners would claim no saving faith in Christ and so are hurtling towards eternal misery. And if your city or town

is currently in better spiritual shape, there is little cause for complacency, because multiple forces of globalisation threaten to drag many population centres of the world in the same spiritual direction as London.

As I was studying my Bible on a train recently, a British student sitting opposite me observed, “That’s a fat book!” “It’s a Bible,” I replied, and then asked, “Have you read about Jesus in it?” This educated young woman knew *nothing* about the Bible or about Jesus Christ, because a secular atheistic intelligentsia have been aggressively emptying our media, schools and public life of gospel-teaching in the name of “cultural tolerance”, for the major world religions are here. According to the 2011 Census there are more than a million Muslims, (more than 12% of Londoners, including the current mayor, Sadiq Khan); more than 450,000 Hindus (5% of Londoners), and numerous Sikhs, Buddhists and Jews. An older generation of Londoners may visit church at Christmas and want their grandchildren “christened”; but the prevailing ideology of younger generations, vigorously promoted by our popular media across most ethnic and socioeconomic boundaries, is an individualistic, libertine hedonism—haunted by a little superstitious mysticism.

To generalise, our city is no longer a lapsed Christian city in need of revival (such as God brought wonderfully in the 18th century) but a pagan pre-Christian city that needs to be re-evangelised, much like the 8th-century-BC Nineveh of Jonah’s day. I suspect this is increasingly true of most Westernised cities. In London we live in a mission-field—in a commonwealth of communities without God, without hope and desperately in need of the gospel of Christ.

Indeed, in our Co-Mission church-planting movement, we have often observed the sobering parallels between cities like London and the tragic sinking of the ocean liner *Titanic* when it hit an iceberg in 1912 and 1500 passengers died. The appalling loss of life was hugely increased by *four* factors:

- a. The desperate shortage of lifeboats—as we need hundreds more gospel-teaching churches for the different communities of our cities.
- b. A woeful lack of lifeboat training for the crew—as we need better training in personal evangelism, church-planting and cross-cultural mission.
- c. A wicked neglect of poorer passengers, who were locked in the lower decks while the rich boarded the life-boats—as we need more churches for the poorer districts of our cities. *But most serious of all...*
- d. A shocking lack of compassion among the passengers in the half-empty lifeboats hovering around the mass of desperate people drowning in the icy waters, unwilling to go back for fear of being overwhelmed. They waited until the screaming stopped and then returned to collect the bodies—as too many of our half-empty churches are neglecting the desperate spiritual need of their communities who are drowning in their sin. Too many churches are effectively hiding until the screaming has stopped for fear of being swamped by the need or hostility out there, until it's time to emerge and offer a funeral service to bury the dead. We have got to do better than that—haven't we?

But where will we find the sustaining motivation, the sensible training, the appropriate sense of responsibility and, above all, the sacrificial compassion for evangelism, church-planting and cross-cultural mission? I'm convinced that these treasures are to be found in this extraordinary Old Testament book of Jonah.

Jonah gives us the essential foundations we need

We have to understand God's missional strategy revealed in the Bible before we can clarify an effective missional strategy for our towns and cities, friends and family. And that's what Jonah gives us—God's basic evangelistic strategy for saving people in every community of every city in every generation. Jonah gives us the *foundational evangelistic theology* that is our primary need.

Please don't mishear me—I'm all for creative missional strategies and for contextualising our ministries (without contextualising our gospel). In other contexts, I try to champion the value of excellent training in apologetics, evangelistic exposition, connective media and biblical counselling (helping us see the connections between the gospel and personal needs as Jesus did in his evangelistic conversations). But across our Co-Mission churches, we are discovering that the principles revealed when God evangelised Nineveh in the 8th-century BC, using a reluctant evangelist called Jonah, are still the effective first principles for evangelising cities like London today.

So let me introduce you briefly to the amazing memoirs of the prophet Jonah.