

Are we trying to do God's work without God's power?

By Bob Young

We know it, do we not? Or at least we pay lip service to the truth: only God can convert a soul. Evangelism is by God's power. That is why we quote Rom. 1:16: the gospel is God's power to salvation. We recognize a powerful word able to equip (2 Tim. 3:16-17), to edify (Acts 20:32) and to save (James 1:21). Is that the only power God makes available to us?

Our well-packaged methods of outreach, evangelism, and Bible study may get people to attend worship, a special activity, or a small group. We may get people to study the Bible and put on Christ in baptism (Gal. 3:26-27). But what we come face to face with again and again is much more foundational: our best efforts using our own powerful words and the powerful word of God, and the biblical response one makes to God in baptism, participation in Christ's death, cannot guarantee a changed life. Only God changes hearts. We can plant, and we can water, but ultimately only God can give the increase (1 Cor. 3:6-8).

We must come to grips with the need for changed hearts—our own, and others'. Lives are not automatically changed because we read the Bible or because we commit our lives to Jesus Christ and imitate him in baptism. Lives are not automatically changed by any external factors. Lives are changed when hearts are changed. We must experience a change of thought and understanding, a change of will and desire, a change of priorities. Paul reminds us that our struggle is against powerful forces such as rulers, authorities, dark world powers, and spiritual forces of evil (Eph. 6:11-12). Satan blinds people's minds so they cannot see the glorious gospel of Christ. Seeing the glorious gospel involves more than initial response—it results in a changed life.

Unfortunately, I have baptized people who were never truly changed—little or no participation in the body, no fellowship, no worship, no fruit. Through the years I have wondered if I failed to say something, failed to teach some important truth, failed to make some point of Scripture clear. More recently, I have asked myself if the untapped power is the power of prayer. Perhaps my evangelism has been too prayer-less. Perhaps those with whom I have studied have not found a spiritual awakening to accompany their mental renewal. Do not people who are spiritually awake continue in faith? Do not people who are spiritually awake touch the hearts and lives of those outside of Christ?

We are breaking down strongholds, bringing thoughts into captivity (2 Cor. 10:4-5). Certainly such efforts, capable of influencing eternity, are important enough to warrant fervent prayer. Effective pastors, preachers, evangelists, and group leaders are prayerful. Fervent prayer is an untapped tool to bring people closer to Christ—restoring the fallen, sharing the good news, encouraging the faithful. Will you take the words of Paul more seriously: "Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful" (Col. 4:2)?