

Rescuing the Unchurched

Summarized and Posted by Bob Young

Note: This article contains nine points about what the church must do in order to reach the unchurched in our society and our world. The nine points as presented here are purposefully brief—I intend to expand each of them in a series of future articles. I am interested in your observations. What would you add? How can the church become more effective in taking the gospel to a world that is largely non-Christian and unchurched?

A summary of evangelism from a few years ago suggested “presence, proclamation, and persuasion” as essential elements. The items listed in this article reflect that fact that for the most part in contemporary US culture, Christians are no longer present in the lives of the unchurched. Many unchurched people do not have a friend who is a Christian. Without presence there will be little or no proclamation, either by word or action. Without presence and proclamation, there are few opportunities for persuasion. Consider also that recent research shows that the unchurched population now includes many who were formerly members of a church.

First, **the unchurched will not hear and accept the gospel (Good News) and be rescued or restored until there is a load-bearing bridge across which the gospel can travel.** Many bridges are available in our world, including technology, media, and advertising. Building an effective bridge usually means that the unchurched person must become acquainted with a Christian. Before we can be used by God to rescue others from spiritual danger, we must build relational bridges to them. These bridges must be strong enough to carry the gospel. Remember the saying, “People become Christians for two reasons—they do not know a Christian, they do know a Christian.” The first of these reasons says that people will not become Christians until they know a Christian. The unchurched who were formerly church members often represent the second reason—they do know Christians and have had a bad experience in the church previously.

Second, to build the kind of relational bridges that are necessary, **Christians must make special efforts to become acquainted with non-Christians.** Since it is less and less likely in our culture that non-Christians will visit the church, Christians must creatively seek ways to meet and come to know non-Christians in contexts outside the church assemblies and activities. Christians must be aggressive in establishing connections and communication with those who do visit church assemblies and activities.

Third, **Christians must make special efforts to become acquainted with non-Christians** in their own families, among neighbors and friends, among co-workers, and among those contacted in the community. Christians must not only make such contacts—they must seek ways to **establish connections between those acquaintances and other Christians.** For most of my years in ministry, the members of the church provided as many Bible studies as I could teach simply by introducing me to their family members, spouses, grown children, friends, neighbors, former church members, and co-workers. These contacts were sufficient for the church to

experience significant growth (25% or more per decade). Churches must make special efforts to establish connections with non-Christians through ministries and activities. Many of these may be “come and see” events which encourage the unchurched to visit the church for a special activity. Other activities may occur away from the church building in order to make more contacts among those currently unwilling to attend an event at the church building.

Fourth, **Christians and churches must make special efforts to meet non-Christians through focused ministries** which have the specific purpose of reaching certain groups. Examples of such ministries would include prison ministries, Celebrate Recovery, family services and counseling, hospital ministries, youth or teen ministries, children’s ministries, Vacation Bible School, and newcomer ministries.

Fifth, rescuing unchurched people who are in spiritual peril will often **require that Christians strategically venture into their environments**. Most of the unchurched will not venture into our world, so we must venture into their world. The key word in the phrase is “strategically”—Christians must use extreme caution, and recognize that to venture aimlessly into the negative environments around us is not wise.

Sixth, Christians must be prepared to **help the unchurched realize that they need to be rescued**. Recall the summary of evangelism mentioned above: “presence, proclamation, and persuasion.” While it is essential that Christians seek a greater presence in the lives of the unchurched through activities such as those outlined above, many of the unchurched have rejected Christianity. Thus, Christians must study and learn effective ways to help the unchurched recognize their need and to demonstrate the value, validity, and abundance of Christianity.

Seventh, to rescue the unchurched, **Christians must clearly point out the path to safety**. The rescue does not demand that every detail of the future life be unfolded and established—only that the way to safety is shared. Christians must uncompromisingly share the way in which Christ saves people. Christians and churches must be cautious about making salvation dependent upon human schemes, ideas, and requirements that are not biblical. Sharing God’s plan for saving people is easier (and more accurate biblically) when the focus is on Christ rather than on the church as the body of Christ (although both are ultimately a part of God’s plan).

Eighth, those who are rescued must be helped to understand **the urgency of reaching out to rescue others**. When people are rescued and recently removed from their former ways of life, they still have many friends and acquaintances who are wandering in the former way of life. Those most effective in reaching out to the unchurched are usually those who were recently brought to Christ. Churches must never stop reminding of the urgency of reaching out to rescue others.

Ninth, rescue efforts demand that we not get bogged down in the processes of evangelism, but that we **stay focused on the purpose of evangelism**. My own efforts to share the gospel remind me that a lot of peripheral and distracting questions can come up in any Bible study.

While understanding the Bible more completely is a great goal, the most important matter at hand when dealing with an unchurched person is to help them be rescued by the Lord. Remember the purpose—“rescue the perishing, care for the dying.”