

Seeing the problem is the first step toward solving the problem:

What is the “message” in New Testament evangelism?

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For over 200 years in the U.S. and for over 50 years in many mission fields of Latin America, the churches of Christ have encouraged people to become New Testament Christians through faith in Jesus, repentance, and baptism for the remission of sins. Some have added “be faithful” which usually meant live right and go to church. Once one becomes a Christian, the primary focus in most churches, and the primary definition of who is a good Christian or what it means to be faithful, is on attending the weekly Sunday assembly.

The majority of evangelism materials and efforts have focused on two questions: “what must I do to be saved?” and “which is the right church?” It is good to encourage people to be saved—as long as they realize that the remission of sins is only promised to those who commit to being disciples of Jesus. It is good to study how the early Christians corporately practiced their faith as part of the New Testament church—as long as we also remember that Christ is supreme. Without a focus on Jesus and being a faithful follower of Jesus, Christianity is defined by church membership more than by living as a disciple. In this essay, I call these two approaches a “church” model and a “discipleship” model.

The difference in two approaches can be focused in three questions. Is your definition of Christianity more focused on discipleship or on church matters? Which of these is the focus in the evangelistic efforts you know? What model does your church use?

To start toward an answer to these questions, I remind us that there are three levels of fellowship in the local church. These have been variously described. A memorable sequence is cell (small group), class, and celebration (worship). One of these three fellowship levels, or a combination of these, defines and guides your church. Your church defines Christianity by participation in one or more of these levels. Your church focuses on one of these levels. Each is important, but one of the three has an almost unbelievable ability to move the church forward. And incredibly, the most powerful level of fellowship is the one that receives the least attention in most churches.

Let me explain. In my observation across 50+ years of involvement in local church ministry and consulting, many Christians who attend the celebration (weekly assembly) are not very active Christians (disciples) during the week. Some Christians who attend Bible classes are not very active. The local church that wants to encourage and motivate involvement and to train disciples to be disciple-makers has its best opportunity in the small group fellowship structure (described in various ways—cell groups, home groups, small groups, etc.).

Attendance is a good measure of the focus in a local church. At what level does your church have its highest attendance—worship, classes, small groups? In most churches, the highest attendance is in the worship assembly. In a few churches that have thought creatively about how to touch non-believers, attendance peaks in the Bible classes. In only a handful of churches is the greatest attendance at the small group level. I believe your church will be strongest and will grow fastest when it is guided by a commitment to maintain and increase involvement in small group structures—when small groups define your church: “Everyone participates in small groups.”

Why is this the case? The celebration (worship assembly) only requires one teacher—the preacher. Class structures require more teachers, but most churches have only a few Bible classes. Because small groups require many leaders, they naturally encourage the development of leaders. Small groups require many teachers and even more participants. Small groups focus on personal spiritual development. Small groups provide the where and when of how to help every disciple become a disciple-maker. Small groups are personal, intergenerational, non-threatening, open and inviting, and

encouraging. Small groups develop leaders, increase involvement, and provide a training ground for discipleship. Many church planting efforts begin with small groups and experience the strength, power, and encouragement of groups, only to transition to another focus as the church grows.

“Is the primary orientation in your church on worship attendance (attractional church model) or on spiritual growth opportunities (discipleship model)?” Because Sunday classes and celebration usually occur at about the same time in the same place, these are really the only two possible answers to the question. The orientation of your church is either toward interactive discipleship in small groups, or it is in a Sunday attractional model. (Wednesday classes and activities can provide a wonderful springboard for smaller group dynamics, but that is another article.)

Look at what happens in the two orientations I am describing. In the class-celebration model, the Sunday attractional church model, the minister spends a lot of time preparing for the Sunday celebration, especially in sermon preparation. Those who are present on Sunday morning are mostly those who are already part of the local church. The focus is on motivating the Christians who are already present. Most go away little changed as a result of the Sunday activities.

In the small group model (the discipleship model), the effort is to turn pew-sitters into disciples who will reach others. Discipleship is redefined. Every disciple can be involved in the disciple-making process, according to his or her own personal gifts and talents. Every Christian is actively involved in evangelism (sharing the good news). For this to become reality, Christians need training in how to share the good news. They need an easy way to share the gospel. There are many ways to do this, but one easy, effective method is available in the Bible study series “Quest for Truth” (available in Spanish, “En Pos de la Verdad”).

Leadership development, evangelism, and discipleship occur most naturally and most easily in small groups. Church leaders are most likely to do what they are described as doing in the Bible—preparing God’s people for works of service (Eph. 4:11-12)—in the context of smaller, personal groups. Some churches have turned Sunday evenings into small group time. Two extremes are common—with various possibilities between. In one church, attendance at small groups is no more than 25-30% of Sunday morning attendance. In another, attendance at small groups rivals and at times surpasses worship attendance. Churches that organize the small group effort well and catch a vision of what it means to make the small group program the primary orientation of the church often have more people present for small groups than they were having on Sunday evenings. When small group attendance is nearly the same or surpasses Sunday morning attendance, it is usually due to the number of visitors who will attend small group gatherings but not the Sunday assembly.

Lots of evangelism efforts seek to grow the church by thinking “**outside in.**” We see people who are outside the church and seek to move them to the inside of the church. The New Testament model is more “**inside out.**” Those who are on the inside go forth into their daily world, not only as members but as minister-servants (with a clear understanding and practice of that truth, not just lip service). The path to developing a strong, growing local church is to turn members into ministers, to turn church members into faithful committed disciples. The key is disciples making disciples—when those inside the church go outside!

The potential of the small group model demonstrates the importance of spiritual development so that more leaders are developed and deployed. Local leaders develop a dynamic that builds more Christians, more groups and more leaders. From these new Christians, new groups and new leaders are formed, and the process is continually repeated.

The discipleship model is simple—the activity of the local church is guided by the goal of making more and more disciples, developing disciples, deploying disciples who will be disciple-makers in a never-

ending process. The church that does this well will reap the harvest. The need is always for more Christians who will be genuine workers. This is what Jesus taught his disciples in Matt. 9:37-38: "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field." Jesus did not encourage prayer for the harvest, but prayer for more workers.

Many churches cannot see the harvest. They do not know where to find people interested in spiritual things. They do not regularly cross paths with and talk to people who represent the harvest. Therefore, many churches focus on the harvest. This is a misplaced focus. The need is to equip and send out harvest workers. There is no doubt about the availability of the harvest. The harvest is not the problem; the problem is the lack of workers. The discipleship model harvests with the goal of developing more harvesters. **In a church that catches this vision, the harvest will never fail.**

The difference between these two models (church and discipleship) is sometimes illustrated by comparing George Whitefield and John Wesley. Whitefield was a great preacher who saw thousands of responses to his preaching but a generation later the fruits of his labor were not very obvious. Wesley dedicated himself to small groups and developing more and more Christians who were matured in the context of the groups; some of the fruits of his labor remain today.

I like a contemporary illustration. Consider a hypothetical preacher who is powerful enough to convert 100 people to Christ every time he preaches, six times each week, about 30000 per year, 300000 in ten years of preaching. But these Christians are basically passive after accepting Jesus. Then consider what happens when 100 disciples are trained to begin a process of sharing the gospel and maturing disciples so that the result is more disciple-makers. Assuming that the latter process is so slow that the duplication only occurs once per year, in 12 years the discipleship process surpasses the individual preacher. More important, the discipleship process is set to multiply and win the world for Christ within a generation.

When one sees the difference between these two orientations, and recognizes that the primary orientation of most contemporary churches is the weekly assembly, the challenge is clear. We have defined Christianity as church attendance. "Be faithful" primarily means church attendance without any major sins in your life.

How different is the New Testament model! The spread of New Testament Christianity depends on every disciple of Christ being a disciple-maker, with a process in place to help that occur, and with resources available to support the effort. Consider these excerpts from the New Testament: "Those who were scattered abroad went everywhere preaching the word (not the apostles, not the leaders). Go make disciples and teach them to observe what I have commanded (teach them to make disciples). Andrew went and found Peter. It is enough that the disciple is like his master, and our Master came to seek and to save the lost."

Two dynamics are essential. Christianity must be redefined as a daily reality that touches life more than only on Sundays. Christians must be trained in how to disciple others.