

EVALUATING THE STATE OF EVANGELISM IN THE LOCAL CHURCH

By Bob Young

INTRODUCTION

I started writing an article: “Is Evangelism Going Out of Style?” The question is intriguing. The word “style” suggests the influence of culture and societal norms. “Style” also points to what is acceptable or not within the culture of the local church. The article developed and expanded; I eventually changed the title; but the beginning point is still the same.

Is evangelism going out of style in the church? What do you think? We must learn to think more biblically. Can the church quit being what God wants it to be? How can the church survive if it does not do what God put it on earth to do?

It is true that some aspects of the evangelism many of us knew in times past may seem antiquated. One sees fewer gospel tracts, fewer door to door efforts or campaigns, fewer gospel meetings. Where does that leave the church? What is the current state of evangelism in the church? Is our commitment to sharing our faith fading or does it simply look different today? Without doubt, evangelistic efforts today must be shaped for a culture and time that have changed. The current U.S. culture discourages faith sharing, especially in public arenas. Perhaps that is one reason why purely evangelistic efforts have declined, often replaced by “back door” efforts that supposedly have an evangelistic intent. Some such efforts are effectively coupled with evangelism, but a majority of them have little or no evangelistic impact and the kingdom results are meager at best.

I applaud the fact that the contemporary church has sought innovative ways to engage the culture around us, but have we along the way left behind a practice that is integral to our faith?

A PERSONAL COMMITMENT

During my ministry with local churches, I was always sure that the church should share the good news with the world. I personally shared my faith; I encouraged others to share faith. I grew to love more and more the opportunity to share the gospel, to see people decide to be baptized and begin to follow Jesus.

I must admit that in the early years of my ministry, I little knew how to do what I was sure the church should be doing. I began with a steep learning curve. In my second full-time ministry, I was introduced to mission work. The local church fully supported three foreign missionaries. Certainly mission work is one way the church can share the gospel with the world. In my third work, I was introduced to bus ministry. Attendance surged and I had a constant stream of non-Christian contacts. Some baptisms resulted, but the numbers were less than I hoped. I prayed for fresh and creative ways to touch more people in the new city that was springing up around the church building.

In my next ministry, I found a wonderful church filled with loving and compassionate people with good hearts. I found a church involved in bus ministry, but again with minimal results. When the decision was made to refocus and move away from bus ministry to mission work, we needed a new way to touch the local community. I was ministering in a church with great hearts focused on the needs of the world, a desire to serve, multiple contacts among friends and family. Since my responsibility was to help the church fulfill its purpose in sharing the

gospel, I studied and worked diligently to find fresh approaches and to prepare the church. Through outreach seminars, evangelism training, and a strong focus on God's desire that the church grow numerically, little by little we learned how to reach out with the gospel. What happened? The church, beginning with about 150 members (plus 75 regular visitors, mostly children, coming by bus) grew to almost 400 in the next 10+ years. This happened as a result of some 250 baptisms, multiplied restorations, and Christians who came and joined with us. People invited friends and neighbors. Family members began to attend. Evangelistic Bible studies multiplied. The gospel went forth.

In another full-time ministry, I continued the same kind of efforts and the church almost doubled in eight years. From that ministry, I moved to work in Christian higher education. Even in the university classroom, I focused on the importance of evangelism. I taught a personal evangelism class for ministry credit and 9 people were baptized during that semester as a result of the evangelistic studies done by members of the class. Later, in an interim ministry, the local church had 34 baptisms in 21 months.

I realize that my personal story is dated and that we live in a changing world. Still, I believe the church is commissioned to share the gospel. I also believe there are some clear reasons why many local churches are ineffective in sharing the gospel and touching people to bring them to Jesus. Here are seven big ones.

First, the failure to develop an evangelistic culture in the church

Churches become evangelistic churches because they are fully committed to God's purpose and believe the power of the gospel will bring souls to Jesus. A church without an evangelistic culture suffers from lack of expectation, and either lack of or misdirected purpose. The church can easily become involved in a lot of good activities that are not evangelistic. The church can easily turn inward and see internal needs as more pressing than external needs. The church can become distracted in 1000 ways, most of which are tools of Satan. The church can become distracted by controversy, building programs, a variety of ministry programs, unhealthy focus....

The absence of an evangelistic culture in the local church is most easily seen by the lack of evangelistic focus in Bible classes and sermons and the lack of visitors ready to receive the gospel. There is no expectation concerning evangelism. The church does not expect to grow. The leaders do not expect growth. The preacher does not expect growth. Growth may even be seen as impossible.

Second, the failure of the church leaders to focus the church on evangelism

The preacher, as I will suggest in the next point, is an important part of the evangelistic thrust of a church. But the preacher is powerless without the solid backing and support of elders who love evangelism, expect growth, and want to see the church grow and prosper with regular additions. Few things do more to develop a focus on and culture of evangelism than the direct involvement of the church leaders. Church leaders easily get off track. Church leaders can be consumed with church problems, challenges, planning and meetings.

Third, lack of evangelistic focus by the preacher (minister, evangelist)

This is usually most evident in the daily focus and daily activities of the preacher. In local ministry, I went into the community daily seeking those whom I might help and touch, invite and encourage. I talked to everyone who would listen about Jesus and the church. My wife and I made purposeful decisions about which grocery line to get in based on our desire to establish relationships.

The lack of evangelistic focus is also evident in the lack of effective evangelistic preaching. By evangelistic preaching I do not mean whether or not the invitation is offered at the conclusion of every sermon. Nor is evangelistic preaching exclusively aimed at motivating responses to be baptized. During my ministry, the majority of the baptisms did not come at the end of a sermon. The sermon is a factor and an important part of the process, but when one gets involved in daily ministry and begins to meet unchurched seekers, most of them are not ready to make such a major decision in a short time. A preacher with an evangelistic focus will have visitors present, but must remember that those visitors do not for the most part know the story of Jesus and are un-oriented or disoriented when it comes to many religious questions.

What is effective evangelistic preaching? First, it is solidly **biblical**, but keeps in mind that the purpose of establishing strong biblical foundations is to bring the Bible to bear in the lives of the people. Such preaching is more than a glorified Bible class. It is biblical, but it is also **relevant and practical**. The result is that the Bible impacts people's lives. People want to return, they invite others, they become excited about the sermons. They talk about them, they share them.

Second, evangelistic preaching is **appealing**. Good, evangelistic preaching sets the tone for the worship assembly. People are excited about coming; there is an air of expectation. People will not invite friends and neighbors if they believe they will be embarrassed or will not have a good experience.

Third, evangelistic preaching is **motivating**—it encourages members to reach out to others with the good news. It encourages members to speak a good word for Jesus, to invite their friends and neighbors. Evangelistic preaching models how Scripture, story, experience, and compassion can be shared to encourage others. When people respond to the gospel, the multiplied conversion stories provide even more motivation because members see that they can participate in the same process.

Fourth, evangelistic preaching **changes the expectation**. It redefines success; it redefines leadership. The preacher who models a life of evangelism and commitment to God's mission, and encourages and trains others in the same model, alters the expectations of the church. This changes the ideas held by the congregation—who are the spiritual heroes, who is a faithful Christian, who is a leader, what does it mean to be a Christian. A church that through evangelistic sermons experiences a constant air of expectancy is able to move toward the heart of what the church is and what the church does. Such a church is well on its way to an evangelistic culture.

Fourth, lack of an effective tool; and lack of members trained in how to reach out

In my experience, most members of the church want to reach lost people. They just do not know how. They are inexperienced, and many are afraid. Members must be encouraged and trained. Most want to do more than they are doing, but do not know how. Some members live

in a spiritual bubble and do not have contact with many lost people. That is the minority in most congregations. Other members have misperceptions, thinking they have to be eloquent or to have the answer to every Bible question. All need encouragement and training. The thing that is least effective is adding to the guilt, which results in more inaction, and eventual apathy. Regardless of the barriers, giving people simple contact strategies and easy to use tools allows them to do what they want to do to help spread the gospel.

Fifth, lack of prospects and lack of effective interactions with prospects

The lack of prospects is usually more accurately the failure to identify prospects. This happens when there are not enough outreach-oriented contact opportunities and events. It is the result of lack of experience and training. It is also the result of failure to open our eyes to the need and to the harvest.

Prospects are everywhere about us. We can hardly move around in this world without bumping into a prospect. For most of us, the overwhelming majority of our friends, neighbors, coworkers, and family members are prospects. Those we meet in the daily walks of life are prospects. The best thing we can do for a prospect is begin the process of building a personal relationship and encouraging involvement in the activities of the faith community. To help people engage the community, smaller groups are usually better than larger groups. It is possible to share our faith in a personal, private setting, but in my experience people who decide to follow Jesus outside the context of the Christian community (that is, they are baptized without ever having attended a church activity, group, service, or worship assembly) are least likely to remain faithful in their commitment.

Sixth, lack of effective follow-up with visitors

Once a person takes the (major!) step of deciding to come to worship, there must be good and effective visitor interaction, welcoming and follow-up. Many churches have official "greeters" (who hand out bulletins or other information), but it is also important to have members who are naturally friendly and have good social awareness ready to meet and greet people—both members and non-members. Many factors, some of which may seem unimportant, help determine whether or not a visitor wants to come back—the atmosphere, people, opportunity for interactions, message, and music.

The preacher should take the lead in making follow-up visits. Other church leaders or staff must also be involved. A good goal is to contact every visitor within 24 hours. Involve the person who invited the guests. Follow-up should be by as many means as practical—email, phone, texting, messaging, etc. Visitors must make connections and friends quickly or they will stop attending. It is amazing how many churches fail to promptly and effectively follow-up with the visitors, thus missing precious opportunities.

Seventh, lack of effective evangelistic studies, with individuals or in groups

I am amazed at how many churches have no plan for proactively sharing the gospel with people. People have attended for years and no one has invited them to interact with the gospel. How will people come to understand the basic gospel story? Sharing the "steps to salvation" without people knowing and understanding the gospel is not helpful or lasting.

There are several good tools available. Many tools that were written and used in times past assumed some Bible knowledge; these have become less effective in today's world where many people know very little about the Bible. An important factor in any evangelistic Bible study is to understand where to begin. Where is the prospect spiritually?

For people to come to faith, they must participate in studies that intentionally share the gospel and call people to follow Jesus, be baptized, and take up his mission. No tool will be effective and no study will bring people to faith if people are not intentionally invited to participate. No "outreach ministry" will bring people to faith if the people that are being touched and served in other activities of the church—marriage enrichment, counseling, benevolence, teaching English, sports, etc.—are not also connected relationally and invited into the Christian community and evangelistic study.

CONCLUSION

Much more could be said on each of these points—the atmosphere and air of expectancy in the local church, church leaders, the preacher, trained members, identified prospects, effective follow-up, and ongoing evangelistic studies. Other factors could be mentioned, but many will fit under one of these seven points.

The gospel has not lost its power. People can still be reached for Christ. I have seen it happen again and again. Few things do more to bring joy, excitement, and encouragement to a local church. I pray your church will decide to make God's purpose and Christ's mission a priority, to seek and save the lost, and to do everything possible to become effective in reaching the lost.