

Philosophy of Evangelism

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In an effort to attract non-believers through cultural environmental seductions and tactics designed to target the experience of individuals, many local church campuses serve as incubators for the lost. Many of these churches, in order to make the gospel “intelligible” and “relevant” to non-believers within the local church, have created seeker-oriented services that produce very little TRUE transformation. Gone is the reverence due God; gone is the awe of God; gone are His many attributes, expositied from scripture, for the sake of stimulating worship, convicting sin, and equipping the saints to be thoroughly trained ambassadors for Christ. Unfortunately, the strategy for many local churches today is a “*come and belong without believing*,” approach to the lost. As a consequence, the church no longer needs to focus outside its walls to evangelize...the new mission field is the local church campus!

I believe there is a need to return to the basics of what Jesus intended with the Great Commission.

Matthew 28: 18-20

¹⁸ Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

Plainly put...the mission of every local church is the GREAT Commission—which is to be about the business of making disciples! However, this commission raises a few questions—the most obvious being, “*what is a disciple and how is a disciple made?*”

Depending on who you might ask, will determine the answer to these questions. There is simply no shortage of opinions on the subject of discipleship. A common view is that a disciple is a committed believer with years of growth and development under his/her belt. Thus, a disciple is a believer, but a believer isn't necessarily a disciple. To the contrary, I believe the New Testament uses this term differently. With few exceptions, I believe that the normative use of the term “disciple” in the New Testament refers generally to a convert or a believer in Jesus Christ. I believe the Bible shows that a disciple is not only a Christian who has made a deeper commitment to Christ, but is simply a Christian. In other words, mature Christians are mature disciples, just as well as immature Christians are immature disciples. This seems evident from passages such as: **Acts 6:1-2, 7; 9:1, 26; 14:21-22; 15:10; 19:9**. All of these passages seem to indicate that Luke's use of the term, “disciple,” conveyed an image of a new convert. New converts were not mature. Luke is not describing deeply committed followers in these verses. **Acts 6:7**, for instance, describes how the number of disciples grew as the word spread. It would be a mistake to assume that Luke refers to mature followers in this case (the same with **Acts 14:21**). Disciples,

then, according to the book of Acts, were synonymous with believers—newly made or matured.

This truth is also supported by the synoptic gospels, where many of Jesus’ “disciples” were continually challenged to deeper levels of commitment (**Luke 5:1-11**).

So if a disciple is a believer in Jesus Christ—newly made or matured—then the command to “make disciples,” given in the Great Commission, can be equated with evangelism (which answers our second question: how do we make disciples?). We make disciples through evangelism! Equating evangelism with the command to, “go and make disciples...,” is further established by passages such as, **Mark 16:15**, “...Go into all the world preach the good news to all creation,” and what I consider Paul’s commentary of the Great Commission in **Romans 10:14**, ¹⁴...*And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?*

Finally, there is a third question that must be asked: if the command to “go and make disciples of all nations...” is a proactive command to evangelize, then how does one define evangelism?

I would like to address this question, first of all, by discussing briefly what evangelism is NOT. Evangelism is not deeds or good works. The familiar adage is this: *preach the gospel at all times, if you have to, use words*. My personal conviction is that the gospel is inherently verbal, and it can ONLY be preached with words.

There is a mistaken notion in the church today that the church’s verbal witness is optional. The “process” of evangelism, which is often non-verbal, tends to soften the need for many Christians to declare the truth of the gospel with words. Too often believers find comfort in the notion that building friendships, bringing the unsaved into the church community, and offering a safe and secure sense of “belonging,” is tantamount to evangelism. The resulting effect is that the church’s verbal witness is swapped and substituted for an assimilation plan. The biggest tragedy is when the gospel message itself gets skewed, as many of the lost begin to feel the pressure to conform, rather than convert. Nowhere in the Bible is this encouraged! Instead, it is discouraged in the harshest tone by the Apostle Paul, in the book of Galatians.

In Galatians, Paul defended the purity of the gospel against the cultural and religious imperialism of Judaizers, whose aim was to absorb and assimilate non-Jews into religious culture and community as a prerequisite to belief. Paul denounced such practices and considered it antithetical to the gospel of Jesus Christ! Therefore, evangelism can not be reduced to deeds which involve a process of absorbing the lost into a form of romanticism as a prerequisite to belief. Neither can evangelism be equated with serving.

The ambition to love and serve the lost are noble ambitions and should be encouraged by every local church. It is a commonly known fact that Jesus, himself, *didn't come to be served but to serve*. Therefore, all believers ought to spend a measure of their lives assisting the poor, feeding the hungry, developing the community, etc...However, it is presumption on our part to conclude that the power of the gospel resides in acts of service, especially when others alongside believers can feed the poor, and serve a city just as well.

The potency of the gospel lies with The Holy Spirit as He uses our verbal proclamation and witness. In fact, the very definition of evangelism essentially means to, "proclaim good news." So evangelism is the act of giving verbal witness to the good news of Jesus Christ, while remaining confident in God's ability and power to effect the heart of the hearer to respond. As the Bible declares, "*he who has ears to hear, let him hear (Matt 11:15).*"

All Christians share this call to urge people to repent and respond to Christ's offer of salvation, regardless of our unique personality traits (introvert or extravert). This leads to my final question: Is there a Biblical pattern illustrated in scripture upon which we should base our evangelistic methods? I would suggest, YES, and it's strictly missional!

Since the beginning of creation, God has been on a mission. This divine mission began with Adam and Eve's sin in the Garden of Eden. As a result of their fall, God judged them, as well as their descendents, with the curse of death and eternal separation from His presence. But God saw fit to "go," and from that time on the story of God's mission has been the story of God reaching out to humans with His word to lead humans to repent.

In his divine purpose, God chose various means to reach the lost, which normally involved "sending." Mission essentially means, "to send." Moses was sent to the Egyptians, Prophets were sent to the people (sometimes to people of other nations), Nations were sent to nations (even through exile), and even Angels were sent to people to declare the word of the Lord. Just as "sending" was an important element in the Old Testament pattern of mission, It's even more central in the New Testament. God sent Jesus (**John 20:21**). In turn, Jesus sends the Holy Spirit to his disciples (**John 16:7**). Jesus sends his disciples into the world (**Luke 10:3; Matthew 28:19; Acts 1:8**).

The obvious pattern in scripture for an evangelistic method is missional in nature, not invitational or attraction based. Today's invitational/attraction churches lend themselves to a type of romantic uniformity, as they seek to enfold the lost into the culture of the church through environmental seductions. However, the Great commission call was not a call to "gather the lost to the local church," it was a call for the local church to "GO!"

As the local church goes out into the mission field as ambassadors for Christ, armed with a verbal witness of the good news of Jesus, coupled together with the power and authority of Jesus, those who have an ear will hear, and the lost will believe, repent, and be saved! AFTERWARD, we are instructed by Jesus to bring the new disciples into community through baptism and fellowship (**Matthew 28:19b**), and lastly to enable and equip the new disciples to become mature in their faith by *“teaching them to obey everything [Jesus] commands* (**Matthew 28:20a**).

I believe if local churches pursued a much stronger missional paradigm for evangelism—concentrating on biblical evangelistic training with less of an environmental emphasis and more on our verbal witness, the church will be much stronger and effective in the Kingdom. Jesus calls the church to go and evangelize (**Matt 28:19a**), to enter new converts, NOT SEEKERS, into community (**Matt 28:19b**), and to equip the saints with biblical truth (**Matt 28:20a**). If the Great Commission was followed systematically, the local church would become a revolving cycle of maturing disciples, instead of incubators for the lost.