

LEADING A CHURCH TO BE EVANGELISTIC

By Chuck Lawless

The words of Jesus are quite clear: Christians are to make disciples of all the people groups of the world (Matt. 28:18-20). This discipling begins with evangelism, when we tell others about Jesus. God alone draws people to himself and makes them his followers, but we have the unique opportunity first to tell others the Good News.

Few churches, however, do well at emphasizing evangelism. This article is the first in a series of articles designed to address this issue. Whether you are a pastor, staff member, church consultant, or layperson, we pray that this series will challenge your church to be more evangelistically driven. The goal of this first article is to offer some general conclusions that our research teams have reached as we have studied evangelistically growing churches for the last decade.

Evangelism must be intentional.

New believers are often most excited about telling others about Jesus. In many cases, their churches have little in place to keep fueling that evangelistic passion – and the fire decreases. Not only do new believers lose their fire, but they also get increasingly separated from non-believing friends. These same new believers become older believers without evangelistic passion. The result too often is non-evangelistic church leaders unintentionally influencing other church members to be equally non-evangelistic.

To change this pattern, the church must recognize that (1) it is not as evangelistic as it should be, and (2) they must develop a strategy to re-emphasize evangelism. Because no church defaults into being evangelistic (just the opposite is true), church leaders must decide intentionally to re-focus on reaching non-believers. A church without a plan to evangelize will be a church that does not evangelize.

The pastor must take the lead in evangelism.

In more than ten years of studies, we have never studied a strongly evangelistic church led by a pastor who is unconcerned about evangelism. Rather, pastors whose hearts beat for evangelism produce congregations that share his passion. The transition may take some time (thus, pastoral patience is important), but even a non-evangelistic church can become evangelistic when their primary spiritual leader moves them in that direction. That church hears the stories of their pastor's consistent outreach efforts, rejoices in believers' baptisms, and watches in gratitude when lives are changed. As a result, they themselves want to experience the joy of evangelizing.

The pastors we know who best lead their church in evangelism model two strong characteristics: intentionality and accountability. Intentionality is not a surprise, as noted in the finding above. Accountability, though, is often a challenge for most pastors. Which pastors are willing to admit how long it has been since they shared Christ with someone? Who is willing to be accountable to church members or to another pastor? The pastors who are most committed to evangelism are willing to take these risks.

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Evangelism is dependent on a strong belief in the Word.

There is no other way to state this finding: pastors and church leaders who question whether Jesus is the only way to God, or whether a personal relationship with Christ is necessary for salvation, do not focus on evangelism. Why should they if salvation might be found in some other means? Why not just focus on pastoral care and ministry if there is no need to be concerned about eternal destinies?

Churches that evangelize believe that men and women are lost without a relationship with Christ (Rom. 3:23, 6:23), that there is no other name that saves (John 14:6; Acts 4:12), that hell is real (Rev. 20:13-15), and that God is still saving people (Rev. 7:9-10).

Moreover, they intentionally and systematically teach members these essential doctrines so that they, too, might do evangelism.

Churches that evangelize are unafraid to count numbers.

There is little question that churches can idolize numbers. And, too many churches are willing to compromise essentials in order to increase numbers. On the other hand, the famous English pastor Charles Spurgeon – himself a committed evangelist – spoke to this very issue:

I am not among those who decry statistics, nor do I consider that they are productive of all manner of evil; for they do much good if they are accurate, and if men use them lawfully. It is a good thing for people to see the nakedness of the land through statistics of decrease, that they may be driven on their knees before the Lord to seek prosperity; and, on the other hand, it is by no means an evil thing for workers to be encouraged by having some account of results set before them. I should be very sorry if the practice of adding up, and deducting, and giving in the net result were to be abandoned, for it must be right to know our numerical condition. It has been noticed that those who object to the process are often brethren whose unsatisfactory reports should somewhat humiliate them The fact is, you *can* reckon very correctly if the figures are honest, and if all circumstances are taken into consideration if there is no increase, you may calculate with considerable accuracy that there is not much being done; and if there is a clear decrease among a growing population, you may reckon that the prayers of the people and the preaching of the minister are not of the most powerful kind.¹

To these words, many pastors of evangelistic churches would echo, “Amen.” Amen, indeed.

¹ Charles Spurgeon, *The Soul Winner* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963), 17-18.