

Biblical Evangelism

Biblical Guidelines to Effective Evangelism



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Introduction

This is a brief workbook on the most exciting and valuable activity in the whole world; **the work of evangelizing and recovering a lost soul**. Today, each member can have a valuable part in this great work.

There is no contest or competition that has the meaning and eternal value of this work. When we are in eternity, we will either be like the rich man of Luke 16, worrying about the souls of lost loved ones, or like the singers in Revelation, rejoicing over our salvation. For eternity, our thoughts are going to be about the importance of salvation.

This workbook is the “take home” material for a series of sermons and a workshop on Biblical Evangelism. It is a picture of the great potential of conservative New Testament churches!

Some years ago I purchased a fairly comprehensive bibliography of church growth books and set out to critically read them and glean the things I could. Some things in them were wrong but the final messages that filtered out from them said that conservative churches are uniquely positioned to grow in our urban world.

I am not an expert but I am an interested student of Biblical evangelism. These are some things that have worked in Bible times and in growing New Testament churches today.

There have been some great changes that have taken place in America and in our lives that have deeply affected the answer to the question, “Which evangelistic method is the most effective in urban churches today?” Before World War II, most churches of Christ in America were in rural areas. Today, even the “countryside” is really a suburb and evangelism does not follow the patterns and successes of the 1930’s.

After an introduction, I will focus on Biblical passages and motivation, on the changes that have taken place, on the things that work today (and how we can do them better), and on the Biblical commandments that help us retain our hard-won converts.

This is written in segmented thoughts that supplement the oral material I will present. It may be read like a magazine, where you pick and choose what you think you need.

Judgment Matters Are Opinions What This Booklet Will Say

The basic thesis of this workbook is that God has given us the job of evangelism. Yet, society has reshaped and changed members and prospects. Fortunately, the Bible is comprehensive and will direct us as we learn and respond to a rapidly changing society that still needs God's broad based message. Many people still recognize they need something that God offers. We need to hunger for souls so much that we will find the Biblical and scriptural ways of communicating it in spite of the changes that have developed. So, we need to make scriptural decisions and get on with the Biblical evangelism that God has commissioned.

Matters of Opinion

I will use some forceful terms through this workbook such as must, need, required, and essential. Most of these apply to actions that are matters of judgment. The forceful terms generally do not apply to Biblical commands, only to Biblically acceptable expediencies. The terms state how important I think those practices are to growth today. Their importance has been impressed on me and others through reading, years of observations, questions, discussion, and experimenting. Yet, these are still matters of judgment and they are options. They are just my conclusions. It would be sinful for me to force my opinions on other brethren or congregations.

My conclusions are not meant to demand certain actions from congregations. The rationale for the opinion is sometimes given. It is used to stimulate evaluation about what is best. I know that through investigation, prayer and pressing desire, the best answers for you or your congregation can be found.

Experimenting within Biblical limits is certainly encouraged. I would love to know the results of all successes and failures and the factors of them. It will speed my accumulation of wisdom and experience.

I'm not writing this to tell you how you *must* act in matters of opinion. I will forcefully emphasize some optional opinions that I see as very important today. Yet, probably many of those actions will need to be adjusted and new Biblical options will have to be practiced in just a few years.

Experiments with other methods should go on. I would love to hear about all activities that succeed. I would love to hear about all efforts that fail.

I want to thank you for allowing me to stimulate your heart and your wisdom with the questions I ask and the observations that I make!

Biblical Foundations

God planned for an evangelistic people when he first designed the scheme of redemption. Evangelism was a vital link in the chain of grace and mercy that God extended to dying sinners. If we seek to be God's people, we must emphasize evangelism as much as God did when he planned a way for sinful man to be included in the exciting joys of heaven.

When we minimize evangelism, neglect it, or replace it with some other "religious" activity, as men have often done, we are not Biblical! We are surely NOT following a Biblical pattern. Here are some of the scriptures where God indicated the primary role that evangelism played in his benevolent scheme for man's redemption.

Consider the priority that God gave evangelism when he gave the Great Commission! What does it demand from you and me?

Matt 28:19-20

19 "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit,
20 teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." (NAS)

One of the most important passages that impresses me the most is that complete picture of the kingdom which God intended. Its center was the death and suffering of Christ and its expected result was a stream of believers who had to tell the gospel to later generations! After the great prophecies of the crucifixion of Jesus, the Psalmist said:

Ps 22:30-31

30 Posterity will serve Him; it will be told of the LORD to the coming generation.
31 They will come and will declare His righteousness to a people who will be born, that He has performed it. (NAS)

Jews became Jews by birth. Christians were going to become a part of God's people through teaching, and belief. It was a process centered around evangelism.

Jer 31:31-34

31 "Behold, days are coming," declares the LORD, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah,
32 not like the covenant which I made with their fathers in the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt,

My covenant which they broke, although I was a husband to them,” declares the LORD.

33 “But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days,” declares the LORD, “I will put My law within them, and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.

34 “And they shall not teach again, each man his neighbor and each man his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they shall all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them,” declares the LORD, “for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more.” (NAS)

God intended for his kingdom to spread His Word abroad through the whole world from the early pictures of his kingdom.

Isa 2:2-3

2 Now it will come about that In the last days, the mountain of the house of the LORD will be established as the chief of the mountains, and will be raised above the hills; and all the nations will stream to it.

3 And many peoples will come and say, “Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that He may teach us concerning His ways, and that we may walk in His paths.” For the law will go forth from Zion, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. (NAS)

The message of the Gospel was so vital that any belief in it would demand an evangelistic proclamation!

2 Cor 4:13

13 But having the same spirit of faith, according to what is written, “I believed, therefore I spoke,” we also believe, therefore also we speak; (NAS)

In fact the compulsion for evangelism is also a part of God’s emphasis on the proclamation of His Word!

1 Cor 9:16

16 For if I preach the gospel, I have nothing to boast of, for I am under compulsion; for woe is me if I do not preach the gospel. (NAS)

The job of evangelism is so great that every member is critically needed if we are going to succeed at this vital task! Identify the words in Eph. 4:16 that show the importance of the participation of every member in Biblical Evangelism!

Eph 4:16

16 from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by that which every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love. (NAS)

Evangelistic endeavors were to be an ongoing and continual part of the work of God's people.

2 Tim 2:2

2 And the things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, these entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also. (NAS)

Teaching is a skill. We can always do it better if we are conscientious about how we do it.

2 Tim 2:24-26

24 And the Lord's bond-servant must not be quarrelsome, but be kind to all, able (*this word means "skilled" in teaching*) to teach, patient when wronged,
25 with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition, if perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth,
26 and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, having been held captive by him to do his will. (NAS)

God expects us to bear fruit for him. Fruit will produce another plant, among other things.

John 15:5-8

5 "I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me, and I in him, he bears much fruit; for apart from Me you can do nothing.
6 "If anyone does not abide in Me, he is thrown away as a branch, and dries up; and they gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned.
7 "If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it shall be done for you.
8 "By this is My Father glorified, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples. (NAS)

Jesus taught a great visual lesson about the importance of bearing fruit when he killed a fig tree that was not bearing fruit (even though it was not time to harvest the ripe fruit). When we do not bear fruit, how will he react to us?

Mark 11:12-14

12 And on the next day, when they had departed from Bethany, He became hungry.

13 And seeing at a distance a fig tree in leaf, He went to see if perhaps He would find anything on it; and when He came to it, He found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs.

14 And He answered and said to it, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again!" And His disciples were listening. (NAS)

Mark 11:20-21

20 And as they were passing by in the morning, they saw the fig tree withered from the roots up.

21 And being reminded, Peter said to Him, 'Rabbi, behold, the fig tree which You cursed has withered.'" (NAS)

Too many of us are as strong and orthodox as the church at Ephesus (which is great) but we are also as unenthusiastic about our evangelism as they were.

Rev 2:4-5

4 "But I have this against you, that you have left your first love.

5 "Remember therefore from where you have fallen, and repent and do the deeds you did at first; or else I am coming to you, and remove your lampstand out of its place—unless you repent. (NAS)

Sometimes churches are just living in the past and in the glory days of the great Gospel Meetings, much like Sardis was.

Rev 3:1-2

1 "And to the angel of the church in Sardis write: He who has the seven Spirits of God, and the seven stars, says this: 'I know your deeds, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead.

2 "Wake up, and strengthen the things that remain, which were about to die; for I have not found your deeds completed in the sight of My God. (NAS)

When our knowledge of God's truth has become silent and still, we need to stir up ourselves and overcome any fears!

2 Tim 1:6-7

6 And for this reason I remind you to kindle afresh the gift of God which is in you through the laying on of my hands.

7 For God has not given us a timidity, but of power and love and discipline. (NAS)

Matching Mood & Message

We all need to remember the words for “gospel”, “evangelism”, and “evangelist” and the mood and spirit that these words require of us!

GOSPEL (NOUN AND VERB: TO PREACH)

A. Noun.

euangelion (2098) originally denoted a reward for good tidings; later, the idea of reward dropped, and the word stood for **“the good news” itself**. The Eng. word “gospel,” i.e. **“good message,”** is the equivalent of *euangelion* (Eng., “evangel”). In the NT it denotes the **“good tidings”** of the kingdom of God and of salvation through Christ, to be received by faith, on the basis of His expiatory death, His burial, resurrection, and ascension, e.g., Acts 15:7; 20:24; 1 Pet. 4:17.”

B. Verbs.

1. *euangelizo* (2097), “to bring or **announce glad tidings**” (Eng., “evangelize”), is used (a) in the active voice in Rev. 10:7 (“declared”) and 14:6 (“to proclaim,” RV, KJV, “to preach”); (b) in the passive voice, of matters to be proclaimed as **“glad tidings,”** Luke 16:16; Gal. 1:11; 1 Pet. 1:25; of persons to whom the proclamation is made, Matt. 11:5; Luke 7:22; Heb. 4:2,6; 1 Pet. 4:6; (c) in the middle voice, especially of the message of salvation, with a personal object, either of the person preached, e. g., Acts 5:42; 11:20; Gal. 1:16, or, with a preposition, of the persons evangelized, e. g., Acts 13:32, **“declare glad tidings”**; Rom. 1:15; Gal. 1:8; with an impersonal object, e. g., “the word,” Acts 8:4; “good tidings,” 8:12; “the word of the Lord,” 15:35; “the gospel,” 1 Cor. 15:1; 2 Cor. 11:7; “the faith,” Gal. 1:23; “peace,” Eph. 2:17; “the unsearchable riches of Christ, 3:8. See PREACH, SHEW, TIDINGS.

2. *proeuangelizomai* (4283), **“to announce glad tidings beforehand,”** is used in Gal. 3:8.

Note: For other verbs see above.

EVANGELIST

euangelistes (2099), lit., **“a messenger of good”** (*eu*, “well,” *angelos*, “a messenger”), denotes a “preacher of the gospel,” Acts 21:8; Eph. 4:11, **which makes clear the distinctiveness of the function in the churches**; 2 Tim. 4:5. Cf. *euangelizo*, **“to proclaim glad tidings,”** and *euangelion*, **“good news, gospel.”** Missionaries are “evangelists,” as being essentially preachers of the gospel.

*(from Vine's Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words, Copyright ©
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What are the major things that keep us from being evangelistic today?

When we are not evangelistic, what must we be charged with?

History of Evangelism in The 20th Century

There have been three significant periods of evangelism in churches of Christ during this century. We must understand all three to understand what is necessary to teach valid prospects today. The three periods mark the effectiveness of “The Gospel Meeting”, “The Cottage Meeting” (or home Bible study), and “The Visitor or Contact Meeting”.

“The Gospel Meeting”

From 1900 to 1950, the Lord’s church in America had many rural congregations and few preachers. Members were not very busy each evening and many non-members would attend a meeting. People were more direct and more at ease with confrontation in that age, so powerful, direct preaching, which was based on clear Biblical proofs, was very effective. The period was closed by TV sets, more cars, and many more secular activities in which to be involved.

This period of the Gospel Meeting was a special time when our method was uniquely qualified to fit the life style and daily activities of the majority of our rural and small-town neighbors.

“The Cottage Meeting”

From 1955 to 1970 people were at home most nights with their TV sets on. Weak brethren were staying away from services to watch a favorite TV program. Yet, people were still curious about the Bible and their religious knowledge. You could knock on the doors of two contacts and end up with one Home Bible Study.

Some cottage meetings (the 1950’s term for home Bible studies) were with filmstrips; some studies with charts, and some with a question sheet at the kitchen table. Always, there was an open Bible. In the 60’s I averaged three and up to six studies a week. It was a thrill to study one on one, even though it was different from a gospel meeting.

Yet, more money and more activities pulled people out of the home. More mothers were working. More families started eating out. Now when you knock on doors, 2 out of 3 families are not at home. People are more urbanized. They don’t respond as well to people at their door. Private home Bible Studies are much, much harder to arrange unless someone has already visited our service a few times.

“The Visitor Meeting”

From 1980 to today people have become more and more busy, urbanized, and empty as they fill their lives with more secular activities. They have spent so much time with TV that they don't want to talk about religion or any difficult, controversial topic until they are confident of a controlled conversation. Yet, they still have serious religious need. It is hard to penetrate their busy world and touch their spiritual needs, though.

When you can't get them to come to most services of a gospel meeting to preach to them, or they are too busy for 10 cottage meetings, what can you do to teach them? Most adults (as opposed to children of members) who are baptized today, do fit one predominate pattern in areas where the church is better known.

Most converts are first impressed by the good life of a righteous member. Secondly, they accept an invitation to a service, then return a few times until they are ready to accept a Bible study. They are baptized after four to ten studies.

Converts in large urban areas also come down three or four other routes (walk-ins, neighborhood Bible studies, Radio/TV call-in programs, and correspondence courses) but converts from these methods are only a small percentage of total adult converts at this time. Of course we occasionally convert someone from repeated attendance to a Gospel Meeting or to a home Bible Study which they agree to before they ever attend a service but it doesn't happen much today.

Somewhere there are other approaches that will touch the spiritual needs of people today if we keep looking for them. For most of our efforts though we need to follow the things that work the best while we experiment with the many Biblical options that are open to us.

Biblical Evangelism

Too Broad

There are many Biblical extremes that are sinful. We sin when we loosen or modify a law that God has given. This often happens today in a permissive and loose society. Some preachers think that if they water down their distinctive doctrines that they will appeal to a broader range of people. This fails because the group loses its conviction as it becomes too broad.

Too Narrow

We also sin when we write a law that God did not make. This often happened in New Testament times (circumcision in Galatians, cf. Galatians 1:6-9; 1 Tim. 4:1-3; Col. 2:16-23). Either extreme removes you from the sphere of Biblical evangelism.

Too Unsure and Safe

Brethren also move out of the realm of Biblical Evangelism when they justify so many fears and create so many obstacles that they never can do anything because they don't know if it is an expedient option or a sinister, seductive, new innovation. They are afraid of anything new. For a people who should know the book which commands them to be greatly evangelistic, they are gridlocked and unevangelistic because they don't know about filmstrips, Bible seminars instead of gospel meetings, computers, tape duplicators, "expensive" TV preaching, better literature, or a hundred other fears and uncertainties. People who clearly know the law should also clearly know the expedencies and options. Otherwise, they don't really know the law. Biblical evangelism is so important that it must not be ruled by non-Biblical suppositions and fears. If it is Biblical, it must be guided by clear Biblical command, inference, or example. Also, it is guided by the command to tell the "Good News". It must get the job done!

Too Secular and Busy

When we are secularized and don't reach out with the Gospel, we are not Biblical either. The person who is unexcited about the "Good News" is certainly not "Biblical" because the message of the gospel produces an excited urgency to proclaim it.

Too Lazy

The lazy brother who doesn't want to learn the 1000 things it takes to be evangelistic is certainly not thinking about what the Bible teaches because it's message produces great desire to learn and to proclaim the truth. Finally, evangelism and personal work must be recognized as work and our minds must be turned to the work (Nehemiah 4:6).

Too Immoral

Teaching and personal work by hypocrites and sinners is not a part of the New Testament pattern. (1 Pet. 2:12, 3:16; Tit. 3:10) If you are living an ungodly life and you want to help others, the Biblical pattern is to repent and get some help to overcome your sinful habits and temptations. A cursing tongue does not fit with the sweet message of the gospel. (James 3:9-10)

Too Fearful

Finally the godly man is not ruled by fear (Rev. 22:8; Acts 18:9 "Do not be afraid..." and 2 Tim. 1:6-8). Yet, much potential evangelism is stopped because of the fear of good people who have not learned to trust and plow on. Evangelism that is limited by "fear" is certainly not Biblical Evangelism. New Testament preaching was "bold" and it was not deterred by death, travel difficulties, dangerous localities, or any fear. We need to move up to the excitement of Biblical evangelism and the brave proclamation it produces.

Do We Need to Evangelize and Grow?

Do we need to evangelize? Do we need to grow? Those are two different questions. Occasionally we might answer the second question differently from our answer to the first. Yet, for most common situations, the answers will be the same. You grow when you evangelize. When you are casual about your evangelism, your growth stops.

In this workbook, a “visitor” is defined as someone who needs to be turned spiritually by being baptized or restored. “Growth” is defined as conversions and not as the numerical increase of the membership. Increases may come by “transfers” or shifting. I will define that as “swelling”. For general purposes, when we truly evangelize, converts and growth will result.

Why, then, do certain “evangelistic” methods no longer produce growth? Has evangelism failed? Are we surrounded by neighbors who cannot be converted by a powerful gospel because they will not attend every night of a first principles meeting?

The answer is that the gospel is the power of God. The power is not in the method of delivery. Yet people change. The method that works, changes. Mass evangelism worked for a while in Jerusalem. Small group evangelism and conversions through relationships worked more in Rome.

We must be able to recognize the difference between method and message. Message is set and unchangeable. It may begin with water (John 4:7-10), idolatry (Acts 17:23), or Old Testament stories (Acts 7:2fl) but it still ends with the same commands. Expediency and methods are variable. Our hunger for souls will demand that we use the best method and the one that works. In a rapidly changing world we must work to find the method that is scriptural and gets the gospel to the receptive listener.

Hopefully, this workbook will stimulate confidence in evangelism and growth. The answer to these two opening questions is an emphatic “Yes”. **We must evangelize if we are going to be a New Testament church.** We cannot stop and say “Evangelism doesn’t work today” or “It won’t do much good”. Discouragement does not excuse neglect in such a critical area.

We need to grow! Conversions are vital to the spirit of a New Testament church! When a church fills up and can no longer add visitors, it can feel good for a while. Yet, their self-satisfaction will turn into trouble when the effort of evangelism and the joy of growth become dormant.

Churches do decide they are big enough. That is deciding that they are not going to evangelize unless someone is very eager for the Biblical information. They enjoy their brethren. They enjoy their size. They deny the commands of Biblical evangelism. Soon, they will no longer be the New Testament church (Rev. 2:4-5).

If churches neglect evangelism out of discouragement, confusion, or success, the result is always very damaging. We need to evangelize! We need to convert the lost! When we work at our God-given task, there is great excitement waiting for us.

Attitude Is All Important

The Bible is clear about the importance of your “spirit” or your attitude in evangelism. When Paul was being severely mistreated in his second Roman imprisonment, Timothy was reacting in such a fearful way that he was neglecting his evangelistic potential.

2 Tim 1:6-7

6 And for this reason I remind you to kindle afresh the gift of God which is in you through the laying on of my hands.

7 For God has not given us a spirit of timidity, but of power and love and discipline. (NAS)

Paul’s response to the problem was to outline the kind of attitude that a Christian ought to have in his evangelism.

First, it is a spirit of power. We must believe in God’s plan, in ourselves, and in the eventual success of God’s intention. We must have faith enough to have a spirit of power and a certainty of the good results that will come from doing what God commands. When we pray for God’s help in our evangelistic efforts, we need to be assured that when we do our little part that the result will be the one God intended. Some may respond. Some may reject. Each must make his own choice. We must do our part in a humble confidence. When God is with us, we have great power!

Secondly, we are to have a spirit of love. Love should dominate a godly spirit in evangelism. We must care about the lost soul so much that we are driven by that concern. Check on your love for souls if you are not doing much to reach the lost. Consider

2 Cor 5:14

14 For the love of Christ constraineth us; because we thus judge, that one died for all, therefore all died; (ASV)

Jude 1:22-23

22 And on some have mercy, who are in doubt;

23 and some save, snatching them out of the fire; and on some have mercy with fear; hating even the garment spotted by the flesh. (ASV)

The Importance of Hope, Belief, and Hunger

Is it foolish to hope and believe that the church of the Lord can grow? Have people studied some failures and not the Bible when they concluded that you can't convert people today? Has God reached the limit on his balance sheet and quit giving the "increase"? Obviously not.

When a congregation loses its hunger for souls, it quits working. It loses its hunger when it quits believing in itself and in the fact that it has great power, if it will seek it and use it. When a group quits hoping for growth and souls, it cannot believe in itself and its future.

There are some vital questions you need to answer about your congregation. One is:

Five years from now, will this congregation be (1) the same size (2) a little smaller (3) a little larger (4) some smaller (5) 25% larger?

The answer tells you a lot about your hope and belief. Yet both hope and belief in the congregation's future have to be there to have a driving hunger for souls.

Can you tell me why this church can grow Biblically?

To Grow You Have to Look Ahead.

Paul's axioms about progress in Phil 3:12-15 teach us that we must forget some things in the past to be able to press on to the successes of the future. You can't move into the future when you are looking backwards. To grow you have to look ahead, ponder the problems, possible solutions and plan your work. To grow you have to look ahead!

In your congregation, which statements have you heard the most in recent months: (1) statements about the past and past events? (2) Statements about the future and where we are going?

How Do You Come Out of Problems?

There comes a time to quit dwelling on problems. Most people move from problems to depression. Yet, depression is not a happy state and we must pick our spirits up, believe in God's plan and move on to hope and a positive spirit. Consider 2 Tim. 1:6-8.

The Essentials of Church Growth

There are seven essentials that are required to have growth today. These come from an analysis of church growth literature and an examination of hundreds of church that are growing and not growing. Most conservative churches do most of these well. There are two or three of these that we must wisely work on! Here are seven things that are essential to growth today!

1. Strong Bible Teaching

All of the groups that are growing today are groups with a strong emphasis on Bible teaching. Any group that weakens their position and waters down their teaching may flourish for a moment but that soon passes and uncertainty and doubt undermines their later efforts. They lose their convictions. This is one reason most older denominations are declining.

What a Bible quoting denominational church teaches may be out of context and a false doctrine but if they will challenge people today with more Bible content than they have been getting elsewhere, they have some potential for growth.

Christians should not be fearful to proclaim the distinctive unique positions we hold as long as they can turn to the Bible passage behind it. Groups with far more extreme positions grow well even if they improperly use the Bible. People don't study or check their Bibles today but they do want it used.

People who are not prospects will be upset by strong teaching. Our reasonable prospects will not be turned away though. Church growth research shows the growth of strong Bible teaching and the stagnation of soft compromising approaches.

2. Totally Committed Disciples

Conservative churches have a better percentage of deeply committed disciples than most groups do. Many denominational and institutional groups don't grow even though they make a lot of noise about growth because their members don't want to work that hard and don't care. So one of the major changes growing congregations in those groups have to work on is the development of a core of totally committed disciples. We have a head start here if we put our commitment to work in the correct areas.

3. Happy Moral Lives

Strong moral stands arouse some words of opposition just like strong Bible teaching but they also build respect and provide the foundation for growth. The churches that are growing today make the sound of maintaining a strong moral stand. In truth, they may not practice their doctrine consistently, only outwardly. When they place considerable emphasis on their moral teaching, they become appealing to someone who wants to improve his life in this sinful world.

Almost every adult that I have questioned who had no former contact with the church but was taught and baptized, has *first* been impressed by the consistent, non-hypocritical moral example of a good Christian. Good moral examples motivate people today, as they always have in very sinful societies.

We should not be ashamed of preaching on dancing, social drinking, immodest dress, and such like. In our very worldly age, anyone who wants to improve their life is not deterred by that. Hypocrisy, anger, bitterness, and petty attitudes cause people to look elsewhere. Church discipline, purity, and happy moral lives are strong motivational elements in this very permissive world.

Consider 1 Pet. 2:12; 3:16; and Titus 2:10.

4. Close, Caring, “Family” Love

Urbanization has brought coldness into our society and put distance between people as they are crowded together in cities. Many other communication and transportation developments have added to this pattern of brief contacts with many, many different people during an average day. That makes us distant and leaves us feeling empty.

In fact, in America in recent years, there has been an increasing back lash in our society against coldness. Look at the movies, TV programs, and magazine articles. Closeness, family, and caring are the most consistent elements that have been reintroduced. We need to recognize the mood of our society. All of the religious groups that are growing today are doing a good job of stimulating congregational closeness, warmth and a “family” tie within their group.

Here many conservative congregations fail. They have not realized the doctrinal demands of 1 Peter 1:22, Romans 12:10, 1 Peter 4:9, and 1 John 3:10-4:2 1.

Closeness in a congregation comes from teaching the congregation's job and from the heart and activity of individuals. Closeness is expressed in different areas and at various levels of social interaction.

(1) The congregation must be close and loving as God expected, for the group to grow. Their love for each other should show! Warm, close groups are particularly attractive to a cold victim of urbanization and sin.

Yet Christians must not be so inward turned in their love for each other that they shut out the new prospect. That often happens. We can enjoy each other so much that we don't include the stranger.

(2) Warmth is first shown in our contact with the world. We need to work at being more interested in the people around us. Then warmth is expressed by inviting them to worship and by being friendly to every visitor.

(3) Close groups grow when they learn to include the weak and the prospects more. Hospitality is the act of entertaining "*strangers*"!

(4) Small group relations must be recognized and developed by all of the members, in their individual activities. Prospects that become members need to feel the identity with a group of 10 to 20 people, then with another larger group of 40 (20-60) people and finally they need to feel the tie to the whole congregation, though they may not know even half of that larger group for a long while.

If the first two circles have strong ties, then the size of the congregation is not as important. Larger congregations (over 100) must recognize the new members fraternal needs (1 Peter 1:22) that are satisfied by members fitting that new brother or sister into small group associations.

5. Every Member Committed to Growth

The fifth essential is the **most important of all!** It is where most conservative congregations fail! To grow, you have to get every member you possibly can, deeply committed to filling those empty seats or bursting out the walls. Growth has to be the concern of each element in the congregation. Only 10% may do "teaching personal work" yet weaker members are terribly important to growth. They get more visitors out, when they make a commitment to growth, than church leaders will. Babies in Christ supply a much needed element of freshness and enthusiasm and have many contacts that are now curious.

Every member has to be stimulated to desire growth!

6. Great Enthusiastic Bible Classes

Growth in conservative churches today is centered around enthusiastic, high quality **Bible Classes**. Often we teach the Bible in Bible classes with a casual ease that says we don't think this lesson is really important. We may teach more Biblical content than any church in town but we do it with so little effort and intensity that what our children hear is that the Bible is not as important as school. We must upgrade our Bible classes to the quality of the best teaching. (2 Tim. 2:24 "skilled in teaching").

Then we must build the enthusiasm for our classes to the point that all of our members are talking about them and telling neighbors about their value.

7. Good Calm Steady Leadership

Contentious combative conflicts over judgment matters among congregational leaders (elders or business meetings) is a sure way to kill souls and be guilty of spiritual assassination and murder. If an issue is clear Biblical truth, stand and die for it. If it is your "judgment" about what's "best", you had better never make it a matter of dogmatism. It is sad but it will not be just your soul that is lost.

People demand steady, wise leadership today. Members are around many more organizations than they were four decades ago and therefore they have learned a higher standard of leadership and expect that higher standard in their spiritual associations. Fortunately, a Christ-like leadership can point us in the right directions of service, involvement, openness, communication and love.

Calm, steady leadership is essential to growth today.

Conclusion

We have a head start and we have a great potential. We can grow but it is going to require a broad group consciousness of what we need to do and the commitment of everyone to save the soul of another.

Growth Rates: How Much Can You Expect to Grow?

How much can you expect to grow?

The fastest growing religious groups only grow about 3% per year nationally. Of course some rare congregations in new suburbs have collected transfers in at the rate of 20 to 25% a year for brief periods.

What goals should you set for growth and transfers or move-ins? If you are doing what it takes to convert people you will probably have to accommodate move-ins and transfers who will equal the number of your converts.

When you put all of that together, the rate of increase may be set between 3% and 12 ½% a year. Your first goals should be set at 3% to 5% a year.

If you do everything you should, your growth may be faster than you are accustomed to accommodating. You may run into the building and assimilation barriers much sooner than you expected. One of the real problems of church growth is the crisis that success will thrust upon a congregation.

The crisis of success is that very painful decision of 1) jam in more (which normally cannot be done today), 2) build, 3) have a second Sunday morning service temporarily, or 4) start a new group.

The decision is painful enough that some have selfishly decided that they don't want to grow! They will sit and watch it a while. They don't have to make that terrible choice if they don't grow. That seems like a comfortable decision until they imagine how they will explain that to God in judgment.

Success obligates us. It proves we can do it. That makes the decision to "plateau" and not to grow even more offensive to God!

Where Do Most of Our Converts Come From Today?

Most of our converts come through our church building doors as first-time visitors. To keep these prospects and teach them, there are many special lessons to learn. We can increase the number of these visitors and the percentage that are converts by learning the many wise ways of reacting to their visit.

Just as Gospel Meetings could be done well or poorly, resulting in more or less teaching, so it is today.

Of course, at times, in large urban areas there are some other sources of prospects (and we will look at these) but we get most of our baptisms of adults today from people who know some member or members and are invited to our service where they are met by wise and careful responses that eventually produce studies and baptisms.

95% of our adult converts began their journey to a new life when they were impressed by the good life of a godly person they had observed. This fits the pattern suggested by 1 Peter 2:12, 3:16, Titus 3:10. We then must increase the small everyday spiritual connections between good members and the 500 to 1000 people who know something good about their life. Many suggestions will be made to encourage this potential contact.

Unfortunately, many members are still waiting for a prospect to walk in (as they did in a gospel meeting) or to be immediately ready for a serious Bible study (as they were in the 60's) instead of seeking to increase the small spiritual contacts of members with prospects. These are the small progressive steps that people today will accept and respond to. We must set our vision to see what works today; otherwise we will be constantly disappointed because no one walked in or it was too difficult to set up a quick study by the old approaches.

How Do You Increase Visitors?

The first step to increasing visitors is to recognize that it is possible to do so. People do have religious needs today! More people are ready to visit a New Testament congregation since there is much less prejudice in those who are under 40 today.

Some congregations turn out scores of contacts to meetings, special topics, VBS, and regular services. Other congregations could not identify six non-Christians who attended their last meeting. You must start by believing that there are plenty of prospects who will visit if we contact them at the correct level.

A recent Gallup Poll indicated that 25% of those who do not attend church say they would visit if they were invited to by a friend. Of course the number who would really attend is much lower. Yet, you still continue to get 5 to 20% response to your invitations if you regularly invite associates who know your morals and life. Invitations do produce visitors.

After you believe that prospects are out there if you look for them, you must find the reasons and the style of relaxed easy invitations that sort through all of your friends to find the ones who are religiously receptive right now.

For men it is like a hunting trip where you must hunt hard for the game. For women, it is like a shopping trip where you must hunt and look hard for that one special dress. A soul is more important than wild game or clothes so we should look very hard for one.

When we invite large numbers of our associates, we are really conducting a survey to find out which one is religiously interested at the present time. Remember, that they may only be thinking about a religious change for a few months and a previous refusal does not indicate where their religious interest is right now. That is indicated when they accept our invitation and visit a service.

When Are People Religiously Receptive?

It is very hard to interest someone in a religious step if they are not looking to grow, improve, reform or provide for their children's religious and moral needs. Some have hit rock bottom and want to turn it around. Some simply want to improve. Some seek truth and others seek the one true church. Some hunt for meaning and value. Young parents dream of what their children need.

All of these fit the description of "change groups". The biggest change group available to most congregations is the group of young families with children. There is a 17% shift in this group according to Reader's Digest in 1993. They move to a greater emphasis on morality and conservative family values. They are the very best target group for a congregation to focus on.

College students are a great "change group". They are changing in both directions morally but enough of them are looking for meaning and value that they offer us a target group.

Other change groups are (1) emerging populations (China, Eastern Europe) (2) emerging minorities (middle class blacks & Asians) (3) widows, widowers, scriptural divorcees, and those with major changes in their life (4) new move-ins are an important target group who are having to look for something different.

Some people are receptive when they have had to face the reality of death in the death of a friend or an illness or near accident in their own life. There is only a brief window of a few days or weeks but some have begun major journeys at these turn around points. There are ways of increasing contact with each of these groups when we think about them.

Everyone and Anyone

In the “Gospel Meeting” period of evangelism very few members were involved in the planning and teaching efforts of the big meeting. The member’s role was “to attend”.

In the “Cottage Meeting” period of evangelism, the average home Bible studies were taught by 10% to 15% of the congregation.

Today, the ‘Visitor Centered Meeting” requires another change in personnel. Now we critically need the support and “recommendations” of every member who has any moral credibility. Hypocrites are the only ones who are not needed.

Each member is vital to the process of finding a prospect who can be taught. These members don’t need to be able to preach or even to teach a home Bible study. They do need to recommend Bible classes and special lessons. They need to offer invitations of “Come and see”.

Those simple recommendations and invitations are much more critical today than they were in a 1930’s Gospel Meeting.

Our teenagers need to know how much their words can do. Members who do not teach a Bible class need to be stirred to do those vital jobs of recommending and inviting! This surely is the day of “anyone” and “everyone”!

How Do You Invite?

Rev. 22:17, at the close of the New Testament says, 'And the Spirit and the bride say, Come. And let him that heareth say, Come.'

Here are some thoughts to help you in saying "Come!"

1. Always Remember That One Fourth of Those Who Don't Go to Church Today Say That They Would Go If Someone Were to Ask Them To.

2. Think "Everybody"!

When you think about inviting someone, don't think about even just your acquaintances, imagine inviting everyone you converse with. Last week, a gentleman in our parking lot extended a very warm invitation to Tony Eldridge to visit a charismatic church here in town. It was the first time he had ever talked to Tony. That congregation has numerous visitors. Guess why?

3. Think "Easy" and "Informal"

A great invitation should not be a "big deal". It is just a simple "Come!" like we find in scripture. If it is relaxed and informal, it will encourage the genuine prospect and it will not offend the non-prospect.

4. Be Warm, Relaxed

We are all touched when someone cares about us. We read their concern in their warmth and openness. When Christians are nervous and expect rejection, it is difficult for them to be warm and relaxed. So never expect rejection. Today, most of those who don't visit us are pleased when we are genuinely interested in them. There are many good reasons to be warm and relaxed!

5. Tell Them About Something Specific and Special

"Ordinary" and "everyday" do not justify a religious invitation in the minds of most people. Yet something valuable and special deserves some good words. Tell them

about a special sermon, an upcoming Gospel Meeting, a good preacher, some great Bible Classes, etc. Specific invitations work!

6. Follow Up Promising Invitations

When an invitation meets with a warm response, don't nag, but don't ignore that important response. Think of a tape, or a tract, or the photocopy of a poem or a good article that you might mail to them. A few verses of scripture on the right topic are helpful, if the person feels a "need" for that information.

7. Be at the Service

One of the most perplexing things to a visitor who received a warm invitation and was moved enough to come when there was so many other things that he could do, is to stand at the back of the auditorium in a strange building, waiting for his "inviter" to come in, only to have to sit by himself and his "inviter" never show up. He may wonder why he is there.

8. Make and Keep a Current Prospect List

There are many interesting things to know and keep. We all make lists that help us. A soul is the most valuable thing in the world and if we keep up with any one thing, a soul is more important than our bank balance or our "jobs to do tomorrow". When you keep a prospect list, you don't forget! List the ten prospects that you are most interested in.

9. Set Some Goals About the Number of Invitations You'll Expect

We very seldom do significant jobs by accident. If it is important, a goal must be set and diligence given to accomplish great tasks. This is very important in motivating yourself to remember to talk about special opportunities that we offer here. Set goals such as 5 invitations one week, 10 another week, 20 invitations to a Gospel Meeting, etc. We have plans and goals in far less important areas of life. So you and I really need to set some clear standards that will guide us in this vital work.

10. Keep a Record of Your Invitations and Your Prospects Lists

There are so many things for you (and others, through your records) to learn about the amount of effort that is necessary to find the people who are ready to consider their soul and their eternal destiny right now. Your records and your experience will be invaluable to you and to others. Keep some good records!

**Promise Yourself and God That You Will Say
“COME!”**

How Do You Understand the Numbers Ratios?

We identify our best prospects because they indicate their interest when they visit us when there are scores of other things that they could be doing.

We need to understand the ratio between invitations, visitors, returnees, and converts. (Remember that a “visitor” is someone who needs to be taught and is not used to identify a faithful brother who is just “visiting”.)

These ratios are broad generalities and they vary because of specific situations.

You extend 20 invitations to a special occasion and one is accepted. Two people are present. This is a 10% response. With the right advertising and the right topics, it can be doubled.

Out of 10 visitors, you are blessed if you keep one. Keeping two out of 10 is great.

When you have a return visitor, it takes two to ten other visits before many visitors will discuss religion with you or will agree to a study.

You can increase your numbers with prayer, learning, and sincere effort.

When you increase your visitors, returnees, and studies, you will also increase your number of baptisms.

We must learn the little skills at each vital point in this process that really improve the final result.

What Can a Congregation Do to Encourage Contact with Better Visitors?

The secrets of visitors are the invitations of every member of a local congregation. 80% of our first time visitors come because they are invited by a member. So we must have more good opportunities for “special” invitations.

A congregation should design some meetings to “contact” the better prospects. Subjects here should be on things that prospects are interested in knowing or things they think they need. You benefit when you target one of the “change groups” and preacher and members focus on them.

There are special topics on late Sunday evenings or special Sunday mornings where you plan them three months ahead and announce them regularly for two months before the last two weeks when members need to be inviting their associates. Adequate public advertising is expensive but it doubles the response to the personal invitations. Also 3 computer letters to the prospects will double the response to personal invitations to meetings and special topics.

Special home studies work in very urban areas, apartment complexes, and in gated, closed guarded neighborhoods. Mildly controversial topics work if you use them to identify prospects and don't try to teach them everything in one extra long session. Your first object is to identify the prospect.

The 1991 Lincoln, Nebraska debate on Catholicism, which was one night of two 30 minute speeches, did much more in identifying prospects than it did in dealing with all of the issues that must be studied. Yet it turned out hundreds of interested one night listeners.

Offers of correspondence courses, special religious materials that have broad interest and meet religious needs, and teaching videos all have a minor introductory contact to people with some religious interest.

A well-done VBS offers a special look at the quality of our Bible teaching if members tell young families about it. When the congregation builds its Bible classes to the point that excited members are telling others about them, congregational leaders are doing one of the most productive and valuable building jobs that they can. Our Bible classes target young families better than about anything we do. But the Bible classes must be done well and members must be stirred to enthusiasm.

Congregations that develop their Bible Classes up to the point that all members are excited about them, can produce invitations to their Bible Classes.

College, junior high and high school students are deeply influenced by invitations from fellow students. Yet they are also influenced by the invitations of respected relatives and of friends (even aged friends) that are genuinely interested in them.

Well-planned congregational programs, where every member is involved and talking about them can really increase the number of visitors and prospects. A congregation first identifies them and then works to move each prospect to the next level of interest.

How to Have a Great Meeting

To have a great meeting you should:

1. Pick specific objectives (sometimes these should be objectives that visitors will come out for).
2. Make sure the visiting preacher, the elders, the local preacher, and all of the members know what your objective is.
3. Arrange Biblical subjects that will attract the desired "target group.
4. Start the announcements about the meeting 6 months ahead. Announce it at every service for the last 2 months. Repetition is vital today if you are going to create enthusiasm.
5. Increase member's personal invitations!
6. Keep good records about visitors.
7. Follow up on every visitor immediately!

Targeting

Religious need is deeply felt by a few people today. When it is, it moves sinners to look to the Bible, preaching, and things that show a possible answer.

There are a number of acceptable religious needs that the Bible addresses. Of course, there are also carnal and sinful desires that some eager religious leader will seek to use. We must beware of improper motivations and be careful in our study of the word of God and its appeals.

Within a Biblical context we can target a valid need and direct our appeal to it. We can begin with one valid appeal and direct the mind and desires of a prospect to other areas that are more important. Christ could begin a conversation on water, move through the controversial discussion of Jewish-Samaritan differences and end up on the important topic, of his messiahship. (John 4) Paul could begin with an idol in Athens and the Greek fear of neglecting someone among the many gods and move to teaching about the one God. (Acts 17)

Jesus began the sermon on the mount with a section on “Happiness” (the Beatitudes). It was not an improper appeal on his part.

So we can begin with a prospect’s present needs or current curiosity in valid areas. We can address that interest from a Biblical viewpoint and teach them what the Bible says. As we do so, we stimulate other needs and interests and move into other areas of spiritual needs they may not have considered.

What does it mean to “target” specific groups today? Some broad general topics may not interest many today. In an “information overload”, specific topics are more likely to attract.

Your first target group should be young families. What do they think they need? Help with their children and their children’s morals and character are critical needs that many parents worry about. A topic like “Help in Building Your Child’s Character from Proverbs 1” will not draw many by itself, but the topic and hundreds of invitations will draw and identify a number of concerned parents. Then you can stimulate them and work to move some of them to the next level of commitment and Bible interest.

Here are the type questions that you begin with. Who would you like to reach? What do they think they need that is a valid Biblical topic? How can you develop the topic? How can you get the information to enough people in that target group to identify the ones that are seeking something right now? Answers to those questions will get you started.

In different congregations the topic of “What Parents Want Their Children to Know about Morality!” has drawn numerous parents when tied with preparation and invitations. In July, 1994 some 640 people turned out on a Sunday evening in Texas for a topic like this. Of course, it was advertised well. There was a long period of preparation. Hundreds of invitations were given. It targeted a specific need and an important group and it worked!

You must start with subjects that the target group thinks they need. You have to start with their immediate interest in spiritual areas.’ After you hit the target, then you stimulate their Biblical interest and broaden the subjects.

Becoming specific and targeting may help us hit the right bulls-eye.

Some Things That Help Visitor Flow and Retention

Visitors are encouraged to return when they hear good sermons on needed topics which use the Bible well. Good visuals help the visitors more than they help the stronger members. Bible verses on overheads draw visitors' responses because it is hard for visitors to find the verses in their Bible if they bring it.

Great Bible classes with good adult classes and great children's classes also stimulate many more return visits. This is critical to growth and later conversions.

Your goal with visitors should first be to increase the visitors, then keep one visitor out of 10. Later you seek to retain two visitors out of 10.

The Preacher's Vision of His Work

According to a ten year study by the "Church Growth Center" in Monrovia, CA, the preacher's focus is a major factor in whether or not a congregation grows.

Preachers whose major focus was on administrative activities saw their congregations reach a plateau of non-growth.

Preachers whose major focus was on counseling and visiting members saw their congregations declining.

Preachers whose major focus was on study and sermon preparation saw their congregations reach a plateau of non-growth.

Preachers whose major focus was on visiting prospective members and training members saw their congregations grow.

—Quoted from the periodical **Church Growth**, First Quarter, 1994, 8-9.

How Do You Respond To Visitors?

Once a congregation turns out the visitors, the contacts will turn into good students and converts if the congregation learns how to Biblically respond to them and build on the visitors limited initial interest. We must remember that we are starting with the weak, untaught and under-motivated. We must not demand interest from them that would be there only in the well-taught and highly- motivated.

There is a spirit of warmth in the congregation indicated in Rom. 12:10, 1 Pet. 1:22, and Rom. 16:16. Then there must be that same spirit of warmth that pours out towards the visitor.

There must be a considered response to every visitor. Both visitors to the assembly in James 2 should have been treated with special interest but an interest that was motivated by genuine concern for every soul. James 2:2-4 reads:

“2 For if there should come into your assembly a man with gold rings, in fine apparel, and there should also come in a poor man in filthy clothes,

“3 and you pay attention to the one wearing the fine clothes and say to him, “You sit here in a good place,” and say to the poor man, “You stand there,” or, “Sit here at my footstool,”

“4 have you not shown partiality among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?” (NKJ)

In these verses we see that visitors are very sensitive to subtle messages. We may not be prejudiced against them and only unaware or distracted, but the message is one of indifference that says “We don’t care if you return or not.” When we tell them that, we can know what their response will be.

You must identify all visitors and learn all that you can while being very casual and non-threatening. You must “read” the resistance and fear of the visitor and put them at ease.

Friendliness starts and ends in the parking lot. It requires every member’s warmth and effort.

Members who sit on the back four rows need to be taught that they are the “welcoming committee” because this is where visitors normally sit. Their friendliness and warmth is essential for the visitor to know that we really care about them.

You need to give the visitor good information about the congregation in a “visitor’s packet” that will answer the normal visitor’s first questions.

Once the names, addresses, phone numbers, and religious affiliations of visitors are collected, it must be distributed so that many members can write them and identify them.

There should be an official letter from the congregation as well as personal letters. Brief warm phone calls at appropriate times generally meet with good response. Personal visits are becoming less necessary. When visits are made they should be very casual and probably brief. People are not nearly as ready to discuss serious religious questions today as they were in decades gone by. Yet, after they are relaxed, they are more often better students.

We almost always “underestimate” the motivation of our first time visitors. There are many, many other things that they could be doing. They are not like the visitors to the Gospel Meetings in a rural area in 1930 where they had nothing else to do and the slightest religious interest would bring them to a special two weeks meeting. A visitor today means that they have made a choice to be there, but they will only be there for one service unless we give them the reason to return.

It will help you understand the visitor today if you understand the “iceberg rule”. Only 10% of an iceberg can be seen. A visitor is so cautious today that he will only show you 10% of his real interest. You are not making a serious mistake if you assume much more interest than the visitor shows you. Yet don’t make the assumption that he has so much interest that he will keep returning when you don’t immediately do your part.

On “Friendship Evangelism”

Some terms grow to mean many different things. When these multiple-meaning terms are used, their message is sometimes misunderstood because people hear different things.

The term “friendship evangelism” could be a very useful term today if brethren could define it and only communicate that specific meaning. Unfortunately, the term has a number of additional meanings that denominational people and some brethren hear. Some harmful meanings are worth noting.

If “friendship evangelism” or “relationship evangelism” only meant the conversions that started from the circle of acquaintances who observe the good morals of a godly Christian, it would simply be a term for the process described in a number of verses. (Mt. 5:16; 1 Pet. 2:12; 3:16; Titus 2:10; 1 Thess. 4:12; Rom. 13:13; 15:2; 1 Cor. 10:32-33) This is where most of our converts come from today. This does not mean that public evangelism or evangelism with total strangers should be neglected; only that they are not highly productive for this brief period of history.

“Friendship evangelism” is a harmful term if it means “you only convert your *good* friends”. This is not true. You don’t have that many good friends. Very few of them change religiously in any 5 year period. The circle you see should be much bigger than good friends. It may be as big as the 1,000 non-Christians who recognize your morality and character.

“Friendship evangelism” and “relationship evangelism” are harmful terms if they mean that conversion takes place primarily because a prospect likes a specific friend. Conversion is not a social choice.

Conversion takes place in values and faith—a faith that is driven by the word of God. Conversion may start its investigation when it is moved by respect for an “attractive” (“honest” KJV) standard of morality. Yet, conversion is not a decision where you are motivated more by your friend than you are by Jesus, God the Father, and their loving message in the Word.... “Faith cometh by hearing....”

Barriers to Keeping and Retaining Visitors

Remember that visitors are very weak and that they are deeply influenced by small factors that would never drive away a strong member. Also, most of our visitors are not prejudiced against us or against our religious neighbors. If we shut our visitors out casually, or in our unawareness, they simply go down the street. That's why these rules of thumb are so important.

Parking

Parking is one of the first areas that tell visitors that we don't covet them. Full parking lots irritate and drive visitors away. How do you respond to a full lot at the grocery store?

We need clearly marked visitors spaces near the entrance. There should be enough spaces so that visitors who normally come at the last minute will always have a space. Those empty spaces say we really care about you.

Pews and Seating

When the pews near the back of the auditorium are filled, we threaten weak visitors when they must sit near the front. It is like we are saying "Stand thou there" in James 2:3. There really are messages in where people sit.

There should be at least two areas in the pews near the back where a family of five can sit together. If a mother has to sit one place with two children and the father has to sit close to the front with one child, the family will probably look elsewhere.

Our expectations that visitors want to be with us so much that they will jam in, sit on the front row, or split up the family, really becomes a barrier to keeping visitors coming back. Remember, they are not here because they are already converted.

The "Message of the Auditorium"!

Do you feel the "message of the auditorium" in certain places you visit? Most people do. Two or three times a service, a conscious message is quietly given. Here are vital rules of seating that set the message of an auditorium. These rules are very, very real and more dominant than we want to accept, when we first hear them. It has taken me 15 years of checking them again and again to realize how serious they are.

Architect's seating capacity is 18" per person. Measure your pews and set this number. Yet don't ever think of it as the seating capacity of that auditorium. You will never grow to that figure. The nearest you will get is about 75% of architect's seating figures. Most balconies should not be counted as seating today. Poorly arranged wings or side rooms should be ignored but better side rooms may be counted, understanding of course that whoever sits in them will only get a portion of a full sermon.

The best growth occurs from 50% to 66% full. The message here is "We can grow, we need to fill these pews, we need to work, and we can succeed!" It is ideal when you can vary your seating capacity to always be just over 50% full.

From 66% of architects seating up to 75%, you are crowding out your visitors and growth slows until it stops with an average of two feet of pew for every person. Unfortunately, many churches don't want to spend the money and they sit there with the architect's figure firmly in their mind imagining that they are going to grow until they reach that architect's number.

The message of a 75% filled auditorium is "This is great. Aren't we doing very well!" Somewhere here the members lose their hunger, the visitors are squeezed out and the congregation loses its momentum and it doesn't even know why!

Losing momentum is one of the most serious things that can happen to a growing congregation. I personally think that regaining momentum is four times as hard as motivating an inactive congregation.

Going the other way, when the auditorium is 40% full, The message of the auditorium is "This church will never grow!" The congregation has a very hard time believing in its future when it is looking around 2 or 3 times a service and thinking "This church is just not going to be able to grow."

Even worse is the message of an auditorium which is 30% full. That message is clear and prophetic also. It says "This church is going to die!" In the vast majority of the cases, that is what happens.

A wise congregation dismantles pews and does all that it can to communicate a positive message. Some congregations that have learned that pews come apart easily with a screw driver have begun new growth cycles because the whole mood of the congregation is turned around, the singing improves and they start believing in themselves and their future.

You simply create a suitable “lobby” area at the back of the auditorium where the pews are removed. Some congregations use semi-movable petitions, and others use artificial plants or some visual suggestions to identify this area.

The power of the “message of the auditorium” is proven when a congregation reacts wisely and the negative mood is turned around in just a few months. It has happened a number of times to depressed congregations!

Mass Media Evangelism

When churches seek out and try a new method of evangelism they will almost always select a mass evangelism method. Mass evangelism offers the hope of reaching large numbers of people. It does stand a chance of finding that 5% of our adult converts who are genuine seekers. Seekers are those who come to us without any previous ties or contacts. Mass evangelism also seems to free us, as individuals, of the guilt of not trying. After all, with a mass media approach the lost could be converted, so we are less obligated.

The result of mass evangelism is discouraging after it begins with great hope and a definite investment period of high expense. The first contacts offer hope but they don't pan out. After a congregation tries Bible correspondence courses, radio and TV works, newspaper ads, teaching ads, the telecomputer, cold canvassing, mail-outs, door hangers, and many other non-personal efforts, many congregations become negative and pessimistic about the entire work of evangelism. Yet they have just piled their efforts on the wrong side of the "Mass" vs. "Personal" option.

Normal results of mass contacts are 1 to 6 responses out of 1,000. The big majority of those 1 to 6 responses will never make it to personal study and conversion without a wise, quick move to personal contact. Any time you introduce the personal contact into a mass media effort, you must do it carefully, but it greatly increases your long-term results.

It is much wiser to start with methods that teach a good moral member how to find a person with a genuine spiritual need and then train them to build a bridge to that person. The most effective beginning is training every member to recommend the work of the local congregation. One hundred recommendations a year should find a genuine prospect that someone at church can teach, once we know how to respond to a prospect's first tentative signs of spiritual inquiries. Those percentages are much better than the mass percentages of something like one commitment out of 10,000.

Denominational churches that grow have excited every member and trained them to talk about it often. Do you know any nearby church that is growing where you haven't heard something about it from a member or their family? A denominational church may be excited about some unscriptural activities (a musical performance, gym, etc.) but shouldn't we be "fervent" (Rom. 12:11), boiling, or excited about truth, Bible teaching, salvation, great Bible classes, heaven, and moral help for addicted and disturbed neighbors? Out of 1,000 Christians, how many are excited enough about these things to recommend them to 2 persons a week? Once members are talking, then

free newspaper “press releases”, ads, and mass media efforts have a justifiable return on cost.

We should not hesitate to experiment with mass media methods but only after we learn how to search through all of the personal contacts that touch our daily lives. When we do experiment with mass media, we must constantly look for a way to introduce the personal element.

You have more conversions from Bible correspondence courses when members pass out the first lesson.

Bob Harkrider and Wayne Wells do a great job getting TV viewers to write for different materials. Bob moves correspondence courses to personal contact by always promoting the VCR series and then hand delivering the VHS tapes. The people that our local congregation converted because of our call-in cable TV program were those we were able to make personal contact with.

Two good rules to remember are “When you experiment with mass media methods, introduce personal contact as easily and as quickly as you can” and “always work at the bridge to personal contacts around members first and much more extensively than you do the mass media methods.”

The Crises Of Success

Many brethren are well-prepared to respond to failure and depression in a congregation's evangelism. You work on attitude, faith, trust, and effort. Unfortunately, only a few brethren are prepared for the serious crises that come with success.

When you get everything right you grow rapidly and move up one level. Any 30-65% growth gives you an entirely different set of problems where you have to do some serious things differently. Leadership, communication, facilities, and many other things have to change at that point of 30-65% growth.

Change is expensive and troubling, unfortunately. We stumble into growth and then hit a ceiling. Now every possibility is expensive, troubling, or very difficult.

Since we are full we don't want to grow any more. That tells God we are not going to be an evangelistic New Testament church any more. Rather, we are going to become a latter stage Ephesus, a Sardis, or a Laodicea. We want to be a comfortable, full, successful, self-serving, religious meeting society. But, that is not a New Testament church! We must face the hard crossroads of continuing our evangelism.

When a congregation grows it will run into the hard choices of the Crises of Success. They are:

Do we start a new congregation? This is everyone's first choice but with a few "ifs": if someone else will start it; if we can begin with no problems, comfortable facilities, great Bible classes, and good leaders; and if it will not take too much time or work. So, there are few new congregations that begin without someone getting mad enough to move out or someone being young enough, confident enough, and unaware enough to not know what they are getting into. Realistically, everyone wants someone to start it and it doesn't happen 8 times out of 10. Generally, many brethren feel there is not enough leadership in the original group and the leaders don't want to divide their present resources. So they sit and hope!

Tack on a less expensive addition. If no one will start a new group, then most of us will seek the cheapest response. An alcove, wing, side room, "shed" or other tack-on is added. It seems cheaper and late arrivals, weak brethren, teenagers, and visitors can sit in there. Two things make low ceiling side rooms a disappointment. You can only fill about ½ of the seats in a quick cheaper addition so the seats cost you twice what you expected. You only get ½ a sermon in most side rooms, so it would seem that elders, deacons, and informed brethren should plan on filling them and leaving the better seats

to the young, the weak, and the visitors. if you have ever sat in a wing for many sermons, you understand the desire for a seat where there is better communication.

You can often lengthen an auditorium, but that is more expensive and you can lengthen it too far. When you add on and lengthen an auditorium, those rear seats are better than side rooms. The seats in rows 17 to 22 will be used but communications are lessened. It is a serious decision to cut back Bible teaching by 50%, 25%, or even 10% especially for your weaker, less motivated members. That responsibility makes your decision tougher.

Build, move, or buy. Some lots, auditoriums, neighborhoods, and codes are not suitable for another addition, so the third alternative is even more expensive. Unless we can get a good “buy” in a denominational building at \$10.00, \$20.00 or a lesser bargain at \$30.00 per square foot, then we face the need for more money. We may also have to face the sad consequences for not preaching and teaching on stewardship and giving for years.

New buildings are expensive but not as much as they first seem. Evaluate them in terms of how many average members’ houses they would equal. It’s surprising how many brethren worry greatly over a building that would only be equal to 8 to 12 members’ houses. It was that same proportion (i.e. 8 average members’ homes) for 200 seats in the 1950’s but \$800,000.00 seems very expensive (just like \$50,000.00 seemed in the mid-50’s). Sometimes the cheapest thing to do (and the most productive for souls) is to “move and build”.

Start a second service temporarily. One alternative that saves the most money, results in a lower cost per convert, and maintains the evangelistic momentum for a little longer is the option of starting a second service. If you have Bible classes and a Sunday evening communion, doctrinally you would have all of the questions on this already answered. Unfortunately, inexperienced brethren worry about ending up with two congregations and losing track of brethren. You must do two services correctly, but if you do, you will not end up with two congregations.

First, it is only a temporary situation while you continue to grow 30% to 80% and prove that you can move to the next level. Second, you place 15 to 20 minutes talking time between the first service and the Bible classes and 15 to 20 minutes between the Bible classes and the second service. So most members have 30 minutes (or 40 minutes) to talk to all other members just like they do at present. Third, every member is together on Sunday night, Wednesday night, and mixed in Bible classes and in any work group. You don’t end up with two congregations. It is an unnecessary worry but there are some other problems to consider.

To do two services well, you must keep them equal in quality and attendance. Generally, the elders are at both services, the sermon is the same, and the song leading is of equal quality. You keep attendance equal by having enough courage to move the time of a higher attended service by 15 minutes in spite of members complaints that it is too early or too late. If the arrangement of the first service at 8:30, Bible class at 10, and the second service at 11:00 results in 125 at first service and 75 at the second service, you simply move all service times up 15 minutes, even though the 125 at the first service will say 8:15 is 1 early. You keep both services equal.

To do two services well, you should prepare the people well. You should have a good attendance check procedure. You should expect a 6 month “roller coaster”. When the members come in the first Sunday morning after having a full crowd, the building is going to be ½ full and they are going to be down. But Sunday evening becomes your “up” service with the larger crowds. Sunday evening attendance can even go up. Gradually, over the six month “roller coaster” period, the feeling of “depression” on Sunday morning turns to one of hunger. People finally think, “We’ve got to fill these seats, and we can do it.”

The serious issue is maintaining evangelism and not allowing our desire to settle in comfortably at any level to lure us into a non-evangelistic, non-growth comfort zone.

Sit and hope. Unfortunately, the response that most groups will make to the first and second bump against the ceiling of success will be to wait and see. They choose inactivity. *We sit and hope* that some way this problem will take care of itself. That option normally kills momentum and aggressive evangelism. It is so serious because it destroys the souls we have proven that we can reach. At this point I have seen some churches blessed with economic upheaval in their town or state where they lost 10% to 25% of their members. If they had already lost momentum they stayed depressed. If they had not lost their evangelistic momentum, they moved on in their evangelism and growth and soon hit that same numerical ceiling and that same difficult decision again. Sitting and hoping will be hard to explain at the day of judgment.

We must face and prepare for the “crises of success” years before we reach it. It must enter into our planning process now. It must be talked out and planned out so we can keep on with our vital, exciting, God-given commission.

Are We Sent Out to Save Money or to Save Souls?

It is very easy to get our primary responsibility (saving souls) confused with a secondary guideline (being good stewards). Brethren should be good stewards of money that members contribute so cheerfully but when money becomes a brother's central focus, evangelism loses its, primary place. **We are here to save souls and not save money. Saving souls is how we will be judged.**

It's hard to imagine a financially conservative brother at judgment day being commended for saving \$250,000.00 for objecting to a new building even though the 10 or 15 souls they had been baptizing each year were forced out of the crowded rear seats. Destroying 11 or 12 souls a year to avoid the increased building payments is a terrible choice. It can only be considered if we forget the souls and only think about how expensive it would be to buy property, build a new building, or pay for the salary of a second worker. We must remember that we are here to save souls and not money.

Here is a materialist guideline for money-centered brethren. How much are we paying in total building costs, depreciation, utilities, salary, and other local expenses for every soul which we convert? A Southern Baptist preacher calculated that it took \$12,058.00 in just facilities cost in 1989 for every new Southern Baptist member which they added. (Christianity Today, March 5, 1990; page 24) Look at your financial report. Deduct money sent to distant evangelists from your budget last year and divide the figure that is left by the number of baptisms last year. What is your expense per baptism?

A Case Study Example

Consider, a church with a \$2,000.00 per week contribution sending \$2,000.00 per month to distant evangelists. They have 100 in attendance and 100 members. They had 8 baptisms but only 4 remain faithful. Their cost per stabilized convert is \$20,000.00. The building will only hold 125 so they are already jammed and will not grow. A new building would cost \$500,000.00 and they would get \$100,000.00 for their old or building.

Of course, saving souls *not* be viewed in crass monetary terms. At \$400,000.00 you are talking about their equivalent cost of 20 souls. How many brethren will only look at the \$400,000.00 figure or the \$4,000.00 per month building payment and decide God would prefer they save money instead of souls? Many would even feel good and

virtuous without even seeing the 20 to 80 souls in hell. Its time we thought more about the souls in hell and not let the perceived obligation to save money take priority over our responsibility to evangelize.

What about evangelizing elsewhere? If that congregation grew at 4% a year, their ½ million dollar building would be paid off in 10 years and after 14 years they would have sent more to distant evangelism than they were sending at their old rate. They would then send at 4 times their old rate until they had to cut back to 2 or 3 times their old rate when they hired a second man. After 15 years they would have 178 members and attendance. More importantly, the population of heaven would grow by 78 and the population of hell not grow would decrease by 78.

What is your priority, souls or money?

The Importance of Planning

If you are very busy with limited time for an important job, stop and plan well! Planning is critical to success. It is necessary to save money and efficiently use valuable time. In evangelism, it has to be there to slow down that distressing “start, fast growth, stop” pattern of growth. Wise planning helps you level out evangelism’s peaks and valleys. In a more sobering view, planning is absolutely necessary to get the most people that we can into heaven.

Yet, most churches don’t plan. You could expect someone who believed in predestination or even the direct operation of the Holy Spirit in salvation to hesitate to make plans. When Christians don’t plan and stumble along into an unknown future is it because they really don’t care? Hopefully, it is because we have not learned the normal patterns of growth and how to plan.

A church must “go” somewhere. It needs a sense of momentum. A congregation needs a focus and a purpose. Members have to have a common vision that excites them to work. Planning is one of the tools that create this excitement.

A church also needs to be careful with its money. To save money, it needs to make the wisest decisions in its planning process years ahead. Sometimes, not spending money now is the most expensive thing that you can do. Parking, building, and adding extra workers are expensive. Planning assures growth and good stewardship.

Unfortunately, churches will try to plan, face a tough decision, then put it off, and never face it! The volunteer leadership in an eldership or business meeting has trouble collecting enough wise information to convince every one. It is tough to get consensus about the present, much less the blurry future. It is easier to put off difficult choices than it is to face them and to plan.

The most serious consequence of this neglect is not the money that is wasted but the souls that are shoved away from the lifeboat that was not planned and was far too small. The most serious result of not planning is that a congregation that *could* save many people is stopped at a barrier and leaving souls out there that could be saved from their lost condition!

How To Start Planning

You can start by learning how to look ahead one year, study the pattern of activities, plan the year, set your activities, communicate them to members as a year-long plan and evaluate how you have succeeded and failed at the halfway point and at the end of the year. Collect some other congregations' goal booklets and see how they did it.

When you start a 5 and 10 year plan, first choose two growth rates, one high and one low. Then, project yearly numbers of your congregation's size following each of those rates. Identify where the barriers and bottlenecks are going to come. You may need help to determine when parking, classrooms, auditorium space, and additional works are going to be necessary to avoid being blocked and fragile prospects being pushed away.

Collect all of the information you can to accurately understand the patterns of everyone under 40.

Distinguish between the behaviors of the 1950's and 1960's when converted brethren crowded into urban buildings as they moved to the cities and the behavior today of an unprepared, urban 30 year old with 2 young children. If you want to convert people, you must understand them and know clearly who you are planning for!

However small the first effort, it is vital that we learn to make wise plans. Nehemiah's example must inspire the leadership and planning that are so needed today.

Why Congregations Don't Remove Empty Pews

There is a serious message to both *distance* and *space* in the Bible and in our everyday life. You can be too close or too far apart. When Peter followed afar off, was there a message involved? Would Christ have heard Peter's message of space and distance? When the publican stood off to himself to pray and the pharisee drew close, was there any meaning in their spacing and location? When Jesus and the sin offering was taken outside the city, was there meaning and symbolism there?

We get many messages from space. When we are scattered in a large vacant auditorium, we give a message. The message of space can be turned from a destructive message to an encouraging one by balancing the seats to the audience. In an inter-city group or in a decreasing congregation with many empty pews, it is critical that the message of too much space and distance be recognized and read.

The wise response removes pews down to 3 feet of pew per person in average Sunday morning worship. The remaining pews may be spaced more comfortably. A conversation area is easily created and decorated with silk plants and a table or two.

Yet, people resist this for many reasons. First and foremost, they can't believe it is as important as it is. Yet, every time I ask a member if they get a discouraging message when they sit down in an auditorium that is too empty, they always answer "Oh yes, I do!" One reason I push this point is to help more people realize what it has taken me years to appreciate. The messages of "space and distance" are heard by almost all of us.

A second reason brethren resist removing empty pews is that it makes them feel like they have failed. It seems to be a harmful admission that they don't want to grow. In fact, it is just the opposite.

It is a wise step to improve the singing, aid the teaching, and lift up their mood. It is a commitment to grow and fill those pews again.

When we are too scattered, the visitor will hear himself sing and often stop singing. Also the visitor gets out quicker and zealous members are farther away and have a harder time getting to each visitor as they depart.

People hesitate to remove pews because people in the back who sit on those pews immediately complain about someone taking their seat away. They still sit on the back pew when their former pew is removed. It is just not back as far. The change will seldom caused any permanent complaint after 3 or 4 weeks.

Pride in the past and what the congregation used to be keeps brethren from removing a few empty rows. You do it for the future and what you want the congregation to become. When we look back instead of forward, we are going to run off of the road of future growth. We must learn Paul's viewpoint in Philippians 3:12-15.

It is sad that these and other such reasons get in the way of evangelism and the souls that we can save. None of these reasons are worth one soul.

A final incorrect solution is that brethren think they can pretend the empty seats are not there and that there is no harmful message. Roping them off only intensifies their negative message. An enthusiastic response, "Well let's just get busy and fill them!" can not be said enough times to counter the repeated message of the emptiness which bombards people's moods.

These are some of the harmful viewpoints that infest 7 out of 10 congregations that should remove pews but don't. Yet, doing so would change their mood, their singing, and possibly help their evangelism.

Congregations of Older Members are Quick-Turnaround Congregations

It is a joy to work with a congregation of discouraged, downhearted older members. They are the quickest congregation to turn their work around.

They are down because they don't have young families and they have been unsuccessful in reaching families with children. As they lose the oldest members, they can't see any future or any hope for the congregation. I've often heard, "I guess the undertaker will close the building after the funeral of the last member."

Yet, often discouragement is the best springboard into hunger. Old folks can catch the deep excitement of eternity quicker than young folks can. It is closer and it can be made more real to them. Old folks have more time, more money, and more moral and ethical influence than any group. Grandparents are appealing to young families if they will do a few key things. That's why these congregations can turn it around so quickly.

What Do They Have To Do?

#1. The mood has to change from discouragement to hunger for souls. But even Timothy needed that mood change in 2 Timothy 1:6-7. We are here to save souls in eternity, not retire to play all the time or to travel all of the time. Some recreation is fine but it is not enough for active, thoughtful old folks now. Old folks need the excitement of caring about lost souls.

#2. Once they are eager for young families, they have to work on their Bible classes to get quality teaching. Since they often don't have enough kids to have balanced classes they think they are in a catch-22 situation.

Fortunately, now, you can have great Bible teaching with only three or four students. The Bible Lab program of individualized learning, where each student works at his own booth at his own pace, has excited and stirred numerous small congregations from coast to coast. After your Bible classes have been brought up to the level where members feel good about them and tell every young family about them, you can move to the next requirement.

#3. You have to tell every young family that you want them, that their kids need the Bible classes, and that the church needs them. The moral and ethical impact of godly older Christians is a powerful pull. Twenty-five older folks inviting every young family they see, even if it is just two a week, will soon be adjusting to crying babies and kids rurning in the aisles. That needs to be a sweet, sweet sound.

When numerous congregations I know coveted young families and told young people they were important and desired, young families have quickly collected. Tell them how you are going to meet their needs. Talk about the new emphasis on Bible classes. Look at the nursery through the eyes of a 25 year old young mother. Is there a private place for breast feeding?

When some hardened older man defends an inadequate nursery with the remark "Well, it was good enough for my wife 45 years ago!" it says we don't care about someone the age of our grandchildren. It says "This church is for us and not them." You wonder about who he wants to be around in eternity. Such a brother needs to stop and see things through the eyes of a young mother or father. He needs to change the negative message he is giving.

Sometimes a dwindling older congregation needs to remove some pews if they drop to where there is more than 3 feet of pew per person in attendance. It is easy to dismantle the empty pews, stop their depressing message and change the congregation's mood. The pews are easily returned when they are needed. This isn't an admission of defeat and failure; it is an act of building a congregation's optimism.

If you have been looking backward to the glory days of the past, you need to now look to the future. if you talk more about the past than you do the future, you need to reverse your emphasis.

Rules for Working with College Students

Remember the key change groups or target groups. Young families with children are first. College and high school students are second. There are some important lessons to learn to successfully help college students. Here are some of the background statistics and rules.

The first rule is that you must be genuinely interested in them and in their world. You must talk about classes, majors, job, their future, their home, car problems, where to find a job, etc.

The location of the congregation is not nearly as important as most people think. There are college students everywhere now. This is not a work that is only possible in 2 or 3 state college towns. College students live in every town. They have cars and they drive some distance for most things they do.

You start working with college students by moving into their circles and talking with them about their world.

You should know the standards of normal conduct. When people leave home, many are unfaithful whether they are going off to work, to the service, or to college. Out of 10 students who were faithful at home, only 3 will attend service in the college town on their own initiative; 4 will always hide, and the other 3 will hide or attend, depending on what their parents and the local congregation will do.

These figures are serious. Unfortunately, some people think they would be better if we had recreation and student centers to pull them in. Response from children in recreation centered approaches is far worse than our average. In institutional churches, their student centers average one visit per month per 10 church of Christ preference students. Ping-Pong and card games are not the answer.

This pinpoints another rule. The most dangerous year spiritually for anyone is their first year away from their religious home environment. This is true whether they are 18 or older.

The most important factor in that first year away from home is "who they lived with". They should not live with students with either a strong denominational or a strong immoral turn. It is best for a freshman to be in with a second, third, or fourth year student who is an active Christian.

The second most important factor in that first year's religious influence is the group they choose to run around with. The important element here is for individual

Christians to try to develop a group or a sense of “group”. It is a major element in positive peer pressure. It is helpful in obeying 1 Corinthians 15:33-34.

Until they have a sense of “group” with older student leadership, activities, caring, and contact, every Christian in a state university will become more secular every year rather than more spiritual. If you can develop a group of even 6 to 8 with a quality leader, each one can grow spiritually.

Hospitality and individual activities are important to develop 6 out of 10 students but they will never touch the 4 who are hiding on the campus.

Three or four parental visits on Sundays are to be encouraged in the fall. Parents should have interested members’ phone numbers and should regularly ask when their child was last at service. Students need to know they will be checked on by their parents. 18 year olds in a state college environment are not ready to be sent off on their own spiritually with no contact or checking.

If a local congregation hires a young preacher it gives a message to college students that this congregation is interested in you. So does using the students in worship and Bible classes.

Congregational activities can include a great college class with a quality teacher. Individual activities can include a weekly discussion group, singings, trips to meetings, ball games, hikes, canoe trips, parties, special discussions or studies with the preacher, and a dozen similar activities.

Spiritual activities are centered in personal spiritual growth, helping weaker brethren grow, and especially in inviting other students and finding a good prospect each year.

A college work is labor intensive with activities and hospitality but it is deeply rewarding and it can result in the conversions of some great Christians as well as some good marriages. Some of those young families will remain with you. Some will be a great blessing in another New Testament church.

Understanding the Importance of Urban Messages

One of the great changes in America from 1900 to the year 2000 has been the urbanization of American society. There are very few people in America who see less than 100 people a day. In those many hurried brief contacts we are all changed. Yet, we have not learned to appreciate how much and in what ways we are different or how the present differences have affected our influencing, seeking, and contacting efforts to find genuine prospects with spiritual needs.

People in urban situations know less about local churches. City people today have less preference for any religion but they also have less prejudice. This gives us a unique broad opportunity to reach for more people. Yet, it means that we must recognize that their interest is more fragile, that they are much easier to offend, that we must be more gentle (which is important biblically: 2 Timothy 2:24-26; 1 Thessalonians 2:7) and they will leave sooner during the first contacts, at least until some rapport and motivation is developed.

We must be more aware of our non-verbal messages to urban people. Rural people know a man's attitudes and morals thoroughly. City people don't. So non-verbal messages become more important in urban areas. What does uncut grass, a dirty front door, dust and cobwebs in the classrooms say to a first-time urban mother?

Since most people are going to reject God's way (Mt. 7:13-19), does God want us to pay attention to subtle non-verbal messages or care how urban people will read them? Here are some examples of God's emphasis on non-verbals.

Sometimes non-verbals can be more important than spoken words.

1 John 3: 18

My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed, and in truth. (NKJ)

Paul thought the influence of his dress and diet were important.

1 Corinthians 9:19-23

19 For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win the more;
20 and to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews; to those who are under the law, as under the law, that I might win those who are under the law;

21 to those who are without law, as without law (not being without law toward God, but under law toward Christ), that I might win those who are without law;

22 to the weak I became as weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some.

23 Now this I do for the gospel's sake, that I may be partaker of it with you. (NKJ)

The major differences in Jewish and Gentile lifestyles where Paul had any options were in diet and dress and a few personal habits.

Will diet and dress convert some? Never. Will strange habits in diet and dress close some doors with unconverted people? Yes. Now, John the Baptist was unique and eccentric but he was dealing with prepared spiritual people who were distressed with the Jewish establishment and were attracted to his individualism. Do eccentric habits appeal to or repel prospects? Are our prospects more like John's audience or Paul's audience?

James wanted brethren to be aware of their non-verbal messages to visitors at service.

James 2:2-4

2 For if there should come into your assembly a man with gold rings, in fine apparel, and there should also come in a poor man in filthy clothes,

3 and you pay attention to the one wearing the fine clothes and say to him, "You sit here in a good place," and say to the poor man, "You stand there," or "Sit here at my footstool,"

4 have you not shown partiality among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? (NKJ)

Jesus was aware of non-verbal messages of rejection as Simon fed him but withheld the common signs of hospitality (Luke 7). When we withhold common signs of interest, attention, and concern when people visit, will it have an effect on a fragile unconverted soul?

Since most of our personal studies and baptisms come from visitors to service who are not yet strongly motivated, and since they are not prejudiced for us and will go next door, then we have to read our non-verbals closely. We must recognize how much more important non-verbal messages are to them and give thoughtful consideration to the busy world they live in. Home visits must be briefer, studies quicker, and little

symbols considered more important. These things will not convert people but they will not abort them before the teaching can begin.

Does this minimize the power of the gospel? It doesn't when the non-verbal messages that we give are the same messages that the gospel put into words. Some of these messages are, "The work that we are doing is very important", "You are important to us", "God loves you", "We love you". "We need to walk worthy of the Lord", "We need to be skilled in teaching and do the best job teaching that we can", and many similar messages.

The power of the gospel is in the book itself, in the message when it is preached, and in the message when it is lived.

Urban Locations and Identification

In the rural setting, you knew the churches that tolerated hypocrites as long as some rich sinner contributed heavily. You also knew the congregation that practiced loving morality and godly standards.

In an urban situation, longtime residents may not even know where a church of Christ is, even a congregation that has been there for 30 years. In urban situations **location and identification** are critical if anyone is going to visit you.

The cheapest money an urban church will spend is the premium price they will pay for a visible location. Over the congregation's lifetime it will save much more in ads and turn out far more visitors. The location is not their "motivation" but people cannot come if they don't know where you are.

In the same way, people drive by churches on main thoroughfares and never see them. One man drove by a congregation where I preached that was located on the main traffic artery. For 6 months he was looking for a Church of Christ because of a girl he had met. He drove to a neighboring town to visit a Church of Christ.

Our sign of wood carved letters was neat on a city street. At 45 MPH he never saw it. He drove by us everyday for 6 months. A new sign might seem expensive but it is very cheap for the results it can produce.

At College View, we have a "walking sign". It is small, dignified, parallel with the street and hard to read. New residents know there is church building here, but they don't know who or what we are. You don't read "walking signs" at 35 MPH on very busy streets. Those people will never visit us until they learn about us some other way.

Just the simple priorities of identifying and locating are important in today's urban world. What percentage of the people in your town know who you are and where you are?

The “75” and “200” Barriers

There are two critical points in the growth of the average congregation today where their growth is limited and stopped by influences that they do not anticipate and cannot easily recognize.

I will describe these as the “75-80 Barrier” and the “200 Barrier”. These barriers arise because of subtle changes that are produced by growth. The changing patterns in the congregation overload the leadership or their method of conducting the affairs of the group. At this point, communications in the congregation are overloaded. Workers are overloaded. Old circles or groups are filled and new ones are not created. New leadership is not developed. Often the size of the auditorium will limit them more than the congregation will realize.

The 75 and 200 numbers indicate the attendance level near which these limits are reached. They are not exact numbers. The 75-80 attendance will not vary much, but the 200 number may vary from 150 to 400 and still run into the same limiting factors eventually.

The “75-80 Barrier” is erected when a group grows rapidly from 20-40; then grows reasonably well from 40-60. Over 60 the growth slows and hangs near the 75-80 level. Here the core workers are still trying to do for 80 people as they had done for the original 20.

Also, there is a single group pattern in the congregation that must break up into non-competitive groups with newer leadership which can work with other groups in the congregation. (The “groups” are normally not official or congregational groups. Rather, they are informal. The developing leadership and the groups are very real, though.)

Good communications with each decision-maker and therefore full participation and involvement are also a problem. Communications must shift to a different form.

Unfortunately, if a 75-80 congregation is supporting their preacher, they may be as big as they really want to be. New people would mean more problems and would stretch the already extended patterns of intimacy and closeness in the group. In short, unconsciously they don't want any changes that new people might bring. They think they want to grow but, in truth, they deeply fear it.

There *are* solutions to correct each of these limiting developments when people really want to reach more lost souls.

The 200 Barrier is reached because the one full-time preacher has little time left to aid growth. He is busy maintaining the two hundred. Elders (or leadership) and present groups are fully occupied and can't stimulate new growth. Often the building limits growth.

The Bible classes are treated casually. Worship is not treated as vital and important. Worship services are not done poorly but neither are they done with great interest and preparation.

John W. Ellas, an institutional church growth writer, described it this way:

“Growing beyond approximately 200 in Sunday morning attendance requires significant changes in the way a church operates. These changes are so critical for success that they constitute a formidable set of obstacles to growth. These obstacles are often hidden to the average member. A vague sense of their presence may exist for some members, but they are invisible as a collective force, working together, holding a church back from growing. To make conditions worse, some members are very resistant to implementing any of the required changes necessary for growth.

“The 200 barrier is the most documented problem in church growth studies. After years of evaluating congregations, I have observed, like other consultants, at least seven characteristics present in this condition and the top obstacle relates to staff ratios.

1. One minister
2. One Sunday morning assembly
3. One fellowship formation
4. Facility crowding
5. Small-church attitudes
6. Inadequate member involvement
7. Attendance between 150-250

“A staffing barrier first appears for churches with about 150 in Sunday morning attendance. If a church increases attendance into the 200 range without increasing staff, it discovers a major obstacle. Observations indicate that one energetic preacher and a small core of active members can move a church to about 200. At this point, the preacher and core members have saturated work loads. Multiple staffing becomes necessary at this juncture for a congregation to move beyond the 200 barrier.

“In the 50s and 60s, it was not uncommon to visit churches with 300 to 500 in assembly attendance with only one full-time paid

staff—the preacher. Occasionally, one still can be found, but this situation is getting rare. Members' life circumstances have dramatically changed, requiring a different scenario in a staff-to-member ration. For example, lives are more complicated, more stressed, and more time pressured than ever before. Members simply do not have the volunteer time compared to thirty years ago. (Pgs. 44-45, *Clear Choices For Churches*)

One reaction to having to deal with the “200 Barrier” is that many will say that we don't need to be that big anyway. “We need to start a new congregation.” is the first thing that is said. Starting a new group is great. If it has “elder type” leadership it will grow well. If it has leaders who are not at the level of really good deacons, though, it will struggle. I'm for starting any group if you have two good permanent “elder types”.

Unfortunately, we only average about one elder for every 100 members or 100 in attendance. Also, steady, stable leadership is essential for growth.

Some eager young men “know” they are good leaders until they have experienced 25 tough, troublesome business meetings and countless difficult decisions. Then they longingly look around for a stable congregation. They have been hammered and battered by leadership difficulties when they were more tender than they realized.

If a group has six good elders and three of them are willing to start a new group, certainly do that. Don't worry about the “200 Barrier”. Unfortunately, that seldom happens and the group with good stable leadership that wants to grow will do better than two groups with overextended leadership and an uncertain future.

The realistic fact we need to face is that people demand better leadership today. They belong to more organizations than their grandparents. They have higher standards. They have higher expectations for congregational leadership.

There is also a greater effort that is needed to maintain a group of 150 and still grow today. Much more time, effort, and wisdom are required. Yet, I would guess that it should not be more than the effort that was required in Corinth and Rome in Paul's day.

We need to learn all that we can about “normal” “barriers” and “ceilings” today to avoid them. Saying “We ought to change preachers” or “We need elders” (“other elders” or “more elders”) will not solve the problems created by a membership that has been trained differently from their parents and grandparents!

How Do You Convert Someone?

It is a valid question to ask, “How does all of the work and effort spent to attract and encourage visitors relate to conversion?” A second question is “How do you convert a person?”

Conversion takes place with teaching. It begins when teaching begins. “Adorning” the Gospel or “Attracting” begins with the good moral life of a Christian. Consider God’s commandment to servants on how to make the doctrine attractive.

Titus 2:10

10 not pilfering, but showing all good fidelity, that they may adorn the doctrine of God our Savior in all things. (NKJ)

Is it scriptural and right for a congregation to seek to attract and motivate people to come to its services? It is if the motivation that is used is not carnal and is because of scripturally commanded action or motivation. Love attracts. Morality attracts (1 Pet 2:12; 3:16). Advertising and promotion of our scriptural activities attracts those who desire the right things.

Yet we must constantly be focused on the teaching of the truth. That is where conversion takes place. Anything we do about ads, invitations, buildings, or services must be pointed towards the teaching that is forth coming.

When we have a Bible subject that attracts the lost, identifies them, and takes the first step in the process of teaching, we have not settled the question of whether we are only going to preach “fluff” or whether we are so cowardly that we will not tell someone the difficult things that he will eventually need. Those questions are settled as we motivate the prospect to the point of further study. When we teach difficult topics when the subject is ready, we have not compromised!

Rather, we have followed an important principle of Biblical evangelism as Christ did in John 4. He first interested the woman at the well in spiritual things and then he taught her things that she would not have listened to if he had not attracted her interest and stimulated her.

There is a progressiveness about teaching. Here are three examples of the progressiveness of teaching in the Bible.

1 Cor 3:2

2 I fed you with milk and not with solid food; for until now you were not able to receive it, and even now you are still not able; (NKJ)

Heb 5:11

11 of whom we have much to say, and hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing. (NKJ)

John 16:12

12 I have yet many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now. (ASV)

The fear of compromise or only dealing with “light” and “frivolous” topics is rejected when the whole truth is taught, even if it is not taught in the first lesson a person hears.

There are some doctrines that you need to know first. There are some doctrines that require a deeper level of interest and commitment. A Biblical evangelist will build the interest and the commitment of a prospect and teach all of the truth, even the things that would have been rejected earlier.

Conversion takes place when a prospect hears the Word of God and accepts it. It is our job to teach it wisely (Col. 4:3-6; Eph. 5:15-17) and to teach all of it (Acts 20:20, 26-27). True love for the soul of our friend will require that!

We need to identify people with a valid spiritual need and establish a bridge to them, over which to bring the truth and to bring their soul to God. If any Biblical topic will do this, it has an important place to play in evangelism! Baptism, denominationalism, and the church must be taught today but other Biblical topics are also needed. Is it right to preach on what the Bible says about the home, covetousness in finances, satanism, archeology, or other topics that draw visitors? It surely is!

The Average Study Today

The average study today takes place with someone who has been very careful about committing to a study. They come to service. They fear that we are going to push them. They listen to a few “proposals for a study” before they were sure that we were not going to “bulldoze” them. Finally they agree to look at some Bible verses with us.

The average study today is with someone who has spent too much time in front of a TV set listening to quick “sound bites” and not enough time discussing serious topics. So they have to begin an important study process very carefully and slowly.

Once the study begins, the student is generally a quiet and courteous listener. There is less objection and discussion of differences today. Often, a thoughtful and well organized study will go smoothly.

Unfortunately, a poorly designed or poorly communicated lesson will result in the student quietly going away and never returning. Their difficulty in communicating questions and differences forces the teacher to teach thoroughly and carefully.

It is most important that we get the student relaxed and open, sure that he can say anything that is needed.

There are some direct personalities today. Also, there are occasional studies with those who have never visited service. This was common in the 1960's. Yet these are uncommon now. We don't need to neglect the process that works.

The Proposal to Study

Many people today hesitate to agree to a period of personal Bible study. You generally have to make repeated proposals for a study to a prospect before they agree to study with you. It is important that you don't give up with one proposal for a study.

In earlier years the first proposal would have been accepted. Now, I have to make at least three proposals for a study before I can arrange one. It seems that I must reassure the student that their wishes will be considered and their wishes will influence the subject and conditions of the study.

Closing the Back Door

A baby-sitter hurried three children in from the front yard and away from the busy street. She did not check the back door and soon the children were out the open door and playing on the railroad tracks. Would you like her to look after your infants and children?

A church worked hard at teaching first principles and baptizing people. Souls came in through their front door. Then these eager brethren rushed away to find another prospect. The new babes crawled out the back door. We must learn what it means to close the back door if we are ever going to get many into heaven.

How do you close the back door and prevent the weak and young from being destroyed? There are two important actions that God requires here.

First, God wants us to keep teaching the New Born (**Mt. 28:20**). You cannot lay a 3 month old on a church pew and leave him alone. He will die.

We must teach each newborn actively for a year or we are guilty of spiritual infanticide!

Second, God also commands love and enfolding towards all of our brethren. Studies have shown how important these commands are to our final success of saving the lost.

God expects us to make a commitment to our brethren and prefer them in our social preferences. **Romans 12:10** says "In love of the brethren be tenderly affectioned one to another; in honor preferring one another;" (ASV). God also said we are saved to love in **1 Peter 1:22** "Seeing ye have purified your souls in your obedience to the truth unto unfeigned love of the brethren, love one another from the heart fervently:" (ASV)

This teaches that I am saved to develop a pattern of loving association with my new brethren. New babes need to be taught that. More, old members need to be pressed to do this and "enfold" the new member as they build bridges to each one.

The critical nature of this command is shown by research that indicates that the greatest factor that indicates the long term faithfulness of a new babe is the number of old friendships that they will break and the number of new friendships they are willing to make. If they keep all of their former associations and establish no new ones among their new family, they will fall away. If their new values end 3 or more old associations and they "prefer" 3 or more of their new brethren, they will be there 5 years later.

When brethren obey these three passages as well as **1 Peter 4:8-9** and **1 John 3:11-4:21** they will close the back door securely.

Would We Grow More with Instruments, “Performance” Services and Celebration Worship?

Many people believe that you should have choirs, plays, instruments (performance services), and “celebration” worship services. I cannot establish that these are essential for growth today.

“Meaning” and “importance” in our worship service are needed. It certainly is true that you cannot grow with the casual mood that is far too common in this secularized age. That is when the leaders and members are casual, unprepared, and downplay the importance of the service.

Often, it is the casual and secularized member who thinks that the reason a congregation is not growing is because it cannot follow the “popular” and carnal patterns of denominational churches. Of course, it is the denominations that promoted performance services generations ago that are weak, dispirited and not growing today.

Worship services and Bible classes are very important to God! Reverence, importance, praise, genuine thanks, attention, and effort are all necessary for a scriptural worship service. Visitors don’t require a musical performance but they do need to hear and “feel” the importance of the activities that are going on!

We have to build the importance of Biblical worship services in the minds of leaders, participants, students, and members. This is built one step at a time as we constantly emphasize and improve our worship and classes. When worship and classes are so important that the visitor can sense this, then more is done for growth than “entertainment worship” will ever do.

We don’t need to imagine that we would grow more if we had a piano, choir, or play. We must get back to meaningful important acts of worship, sermons, and classes though.

When Do You “Move” an Urban Congregation?

Rapid social changes take place in modern cities as suburbs expand, members move out and neighborhoods surrounding fine church buildings rapidly become dominated by a different culture. When do you stay for the conversion of the neighborhood? When do you move?

Many brethren make noble sacrifices in implementing their decisions here. Some regret it later. A few succeed. What are the guidelines that I think should be considered?

We must be evangelistic. We must seek to evangelize every race, culture, and social group who will respond. Yet, we must not destroy good congregations with good active leadership in an uninformed effort to convert people by proximity or geography.

In an urban situation, a nearby church building is of minor value in evangelism.

“Who is in the congregation” is far more important. Current leadership is critical. Every major cultural, racial, and economic line you cross will double the chance of not converting someone across that line.

If you are going to convert a few of “them” soon and give the building to “them”, it probably won’t work unless you have already been doing this for some years. If we have converted a few people who have grown to levels of leadership and they want to start a new congregation, great! Yet, let’s not rid ourselves of obligations by turning leadership functions over to babes to solve our confusion about what to do with a pile of bricks and lumber. It takes 20 years of leadership development to have stable leadership.

Congregations should study their drive time circles. They should study where the young families are moving (see related information on “target groups”). They should look at the areas where their recent converts are coming from. They should closely watch the pattern of their visitors (prospects who visit services). **When the neighborhood shuts off visitors** who are the friends and relatives of the members and invited by them, **then it is time to move!**

Leadership is a great value in any group. If you break up a group with good leaders and they go elsewhere, 5 to 10 years of effective leadership will probably be lost. 5 to 10 years out of an elder’s years of leadership is a large portion of his effective usefulness to the Lord. It costs some money to move but you can’t buy an eldership that is respected and followed for any amount of money.

If your attendance is continually going down, I think it is better for the Lord’s work over all to preserve the congregational relationships and its leadership. Those are

precious and they require priceless years that cannot be replaced! It could be cheaper to move and preserve that very special relationship and understanding.

We should seek at all times to convert people of different cultural, racial, and social groups. Yet, when we are not doing this all of the time and we wait too late to start, we should not kill a congregation because of an unrealistic belief that we can create a new congregation and its leadership in 5 to 8 years and save a building that we love.

Of course, we should not work solely at cross-cultural evangelism and neglect the souls that are very responsive to us. We must do both as we have opportunity.

We should not let buildings in changing neighborhoods tempt us to discouragement, inactivity, and the neglect of evangelism!

What Should We Stress First?

Here are some of the important points that have been the congregation and emphasized in this workshop.

Primary Points

- Believe in God's plan and your congregation.
- Build your hunger and desire for souls.
- Pray intently for souls and wisdom. Rom. 10:1; Jas. 1:5
- Seek to understand and look for what works now.
- Build great Bible Classes. Get all of the help you can with them.
- Develop a spirit of warmth closeness in congregation until it shows.
- Make your worship services energetic, reverent and meaningful.
- Give visitors something special that they need and some will come.
- Stir everyone to "recommend" the congregation and invite 200 people a year.
- Pay "excessive" attention to your visitors at the building and in follow-up.
- Make proposals for private study carefully after visitors return enough to be at ease.
- Continue teaching each new babe weekly for a year.
- Make sure that each new member is lovingly enfolded with hospitality and attention.
- Watch for the unanticipated "barriers" that will block further growth. Study them.
- Repeatedly give God the thanks for the "increase".
- Set wise goals for growth.
- Keep up your search for wisdom in your evangelism.