

Faith Pulpit

Do the Work of an Evangelist

Every Christian understands the importance of evangelism, but sadly it is on the decline in many churches. And the scarcity of evangelism has led to the decline and closure of many churches. In this issue of the Faith Pulpit Dr. Daniel Brown, faculty member of Faith Baptist Theological Seminary, challenges pastors to follow the Biblical command to “do the work of an evangelist.” If pastors will carry out their responsibility, more people will have the opportunity to hear the gospel and our churches will thrive again.

Many churches do not have an active evangelism program. This lack of evangelism has led to two negative consequences: 1) fewer people have the opportunity to hear the gospel message and receive the Lord, and 2) the lack of new believers leads to the decline of our churches.

Churches in America die at an alarming rate. Some 4,000 churches close every year, and the United States has one-third fewer churches than in 1950. Further, 80% of American churches are either stagnant or in decline.¹ Anyone driving through New England can testify to the myriad of old, stately churches that are now small stores of one sort or another.

The simple reality is that churches are not seeing enough people come to Christ to even replace an ever-aging Christian population. Every believer is a first generation Christian in that God does not have grandchildren, only children (John 1:12). Church ministries must strive toward effective evangelism in order to replace members and grow or run the risk of dying. All one needs to do is to visit almost any American church to see an aging population that is perhaps only a few funerals from closing. Unfortunately, 95% of believers have never led anyone to the Lord.² This failure in evangelism demonstrates a breakdown in the foundational need of believers to participate in the process of bringing people to Christ.

While many arguments could be made as to the cause for this decline, such as poor preaching, legalism, apostasy, the problems are neither singular nor simple. Undoubtedly poorly planned and executed evangelism finds itself at the root of the problem.

Errors in Evangelism

Errors in evangelism abound whether in the message or the method. Some make the gospel too simple (easy believism) asking sinners to “just repeat this prayer” that produces no heart change. Some make the gospel too complex (Lordship salvation) adding complexities to believing faith beyond what the simple gospel requires.

Some might use no methods, thinking only a lifestyle is sufficient. Others use high pressure tactics, forgetting it is God who saves, not man. Some find fulfillment of their evangelistic responsibility in sending missionaries as if people over “there” are more important than people “here.” Somehow a large missions budget for the “uttermost parts of the world” justifies neglecting evangelism in “Jerusalem.”

Some believe evangelism is the pastor’s job, similar to bringing in a “specialist” to solve a problem. Others wait for those with the spiritual gift of evangelism to perform what only the “gifted” can do well. Add in apathy, a large dose of the fear of man, distortions from doctrinal idiosyncrasies, distractions from division, defeats from sin in the camp, and leadership by a Diotrophes and you have a perfect storm resulting in no evangelistic fervor. Any time a problem surfaces in a church, the first ministry to lose attention typically is whatever evangelism outreach exists.

A New Testament Solution

So how does the church find its will to evangelize? Not surprisingly, everything rises or falls with leadership. The New Testament specifically addresses the pastor’s role in leading the evangelistic charge of the church when Paul instructed Timothy to “do the work of an evangelist” (2 Tim. 4:5). The pastor is to provide leadership to the church in its evangelistic ministry. What remains is to define what “evangelist” means and how that looks in the church.

The term “evangelist” is found only three times in the New Testament.

Acts 21:8—In this text the term describes Philip, the same man chosen to serve the church in Acts 6 and who preached the gospel to the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8. Perhaps his encounter with the Ethiopian initiated his ministry as an evangelist. The title “evangelist” certainly communicates the gospel activity of Philip whether or not it carried all the significance of the church office found later in Ephesians 4:11.

Ephesians 4:11—Here the term “evangelist” occurs third in the list of church leaders. I understand this term to be essentially the equivalent of the modern missionary or even more accurately, a church planter.³ The title “evangelist” in this passage, along with the other three (or four) leadership positions mentioned, designates the man who is the gift given by Christ to the church rather than a spiritual endowment given to an individual (as in 1 Corinthians 12). The term “evangelist” refers to the emphasis this man should place on a gospel-centered ministry. The passage contrasts the emphasis between a ministry that is primarily gospel centered (evangelist) and a ministry that is primarily discipleship centered (pastor/teacher).

2 Timothy 4:5—The third passage using the term “evangelist” instructed Pastor Timothy to “do the work of an evangelist.” On one hand, the instruction clearly teaches that gospel ministry must be part of the pastor’s regular, planned activity. On the other hand, the instruction implies how easy it might be for a pastor to neglect this ministry because of a schedule filled with too many conflicting priorities.

Evangelistic Preaching and Practice

A pastor’s leadership in evangelism functions with two primary thrusts. The first thrust is the ministry of the Word in both preaching and teaching (2 Tim. 4:2). Evangelism must be a constant theme in preaching. At every turn the preacher must ask how any given passage connects to the gospel. We must preach Christ crucified (1 Cor. 2:2).

Evangelistic preaching seems to be a lost art today. Gospel preaching encompasses not only communicating the gospel itself and training God’s people to use the Scriptures in their witnessing, but it also, and perhaps most importantly, involves communicating a passion for the lost through the Word.

Certainly evangelistic preaching includes preaching explicit gospel sermons. Some circumstances lend themselves readily to this kind of sermon such as a funeral, but too few preachers regularly preach gospel messages to their own congregations. Furthermore, preachers need to understand how passages not explicitly centered on the gospel touch the gospel. This procedure is not reading into a passage but rather connecting the passage to the greater context of the Bible.

We pastors should intentionally teach our people how to use the Bible evangelistically. Let your people know that if they invite an unsaved visitor to the services, the gospel will be clearly presented. A pastor ought to be able to adjust his sermon to include a greater emphasis upon the gospel if he knows unexpected, unsaved people are present. I was recently a guest preacher in a church that was between pastors. I was completely taken off guard by a huge number of visitors in the evening service, so I changed the entire emphasis of the sermon to a gospel-centered message from the same passage that I originally planned to be a challenge for Christian growth. To say that the sermon I prepared was the sermon I had to preach would have been a disservice to the unsaved there that night.

The well-known story is told of D. L. Moody's unfinished sermon. One Sunday he preached a message with the intention of giving the gospel the next Sunday as he concluded the sermon. What he didn't know was that week the infamous Chicago fire struck. The fire burned the church, the sermon was never finished, and Moody always regretted not giving the gospel when he had the opportunity.

The second thrust of a pastor's evangelistic emphasis is his example to the flock (1 Tim. 4:12; 1 Pet. 5:3). The pastor must be a practitioner of evangelism. He must have a passion for the lost souls of people.

He must constantly have evangelism on his agenda and priority list. The church will never rise in its passion for the lost above the passion demonstrated by the pastor. For this reason I determined early in my pastoral ministry never to leave the home of a church visitor without giving a clear gospel challenge.⁴

A Busy Week

Pastors can easily lose sight of the need to be evangelists. A pastor's life is a weekly grind. Students think final exams are difficult at the end of a semester, but a faithful pastor can feel like he faces final exams every week. The pressure to be prepared each Sunday with multiple original sermons that inspire, challenge, and convict can overwhelm even an experienced pastor. Add to a pastor's preaching/teaching duties administration, deacons' meetings, counseling, Bible studies, and hospital calls, which can all easily come before evangelism. Trying to fit evangelism into "down" time means evangelism rarely happens.

The solution must be that we pastors take Paul's instruction to heart and consistently place evangelism high on our priority list. We need to be aggressive in seeking gospel opportunities. We should set personal goals for monthly and yearly calls, gospel presentations, and even decisions. Such goals should be reachable, measurable, and aggressive. We need to force ourselves out of our comfort zone. We do this not to boast but to motivate and keep the evangelist mandate ever before our eyes. We also need to pray for open doors for the gospel (Col. 4:3-6, esp. v. 3). We need to ask the Lord to bring unsaved people across our path and then be ready with the gospel.

Paul's instruction is not about possessing a certain spiritual gift set. I have met only a handful of people in my lifetime who seem extraordinarily capable with the gospel, and interestingly most of them were not pastors. A pastor and church are truly blessed if they have one such person in the membership. Paul's command, however, is not about our ability; rather it's about our responsibility. Paul's instruction is not given to members of the congregation. His instruction directly relates to leadership in the church and setting the pace for others to follow.

Pastor, take seriously your responsibility to “do the work of an evangelist.” Read more, study more, pray more, teach more, and preach more on evangelism. Everything in your church rises or falls on leadership. Lead your church in its pursuit of evangelism, always remembering that it is God who gives the increase.

Works Cited

1. <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/christiancrier/2013/10/26/why-we-are-losing-so-many-churches-in-the-united-states/> accessed 1/7/15.
2. This statistic is commonly used though unconfirmed. I have no reason to dispute it.
3. I understand the modern use of “evangelist” to be essentially an itinerant missionary.
4. Unless providentially hindered.

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