

The *SBJT* Forum: Neglected Matters in Evangelism

Editor's Note: Readers should be aware of the forum's format. D. A. Carson, Al Jackson, Ajith Fernando, Robert Coleman, and John Mark Terry have been asked specific questions to which they have provided written responses. These writers are not responding to one another. The journal's goal for the Forum is to provide significant thinkers' views on topics of interest without requiring lengthy articles from these heavily-committed individuals. Their answers are presented in an order that hopefully makes the forum read as much like a unified presentation as possible.

SBJT: Granted that there are spurious conversions in the Bible, what criteria help us to discern that a profession of faith is genuine?

D. A. Carson: Many complex questions occupy the attention of the thoughtful evangelist, but this is surely one of the most complex.

The reason why it is an important question is bound up with the many passages in the Bible that depict spurious conversions. For instance, in the parable of the sower (better called, perhaps, the parable of the soils), Jesus says that some people, "like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy" (Mark 4:16), but that as soon as trouble comes they quickly fall away, for they have no root. In the Palestine of Jesus' day, "rocky places" referred to a setting where there was a thin layer of topsoil over limestone bedrock. Because the topsoil was so shallow, it warmed up the fastest in the spring, and the seed embedded there germinated most quickly. Outside the metaphorical world, some people hear the word and "at once receive it with joy." They seem to be the most promising of the crop. But once the early rains have died away and the full heat of the mid-eastern sun blazes down, the roots stretch

down for water, cannot penetrate the bedrock, and the plant dies. Outside the metaphorical world, sometimes the very people who seem to be the most promising of a crop of converts turn out to have no root, and when the first whiff of trouble shows up, they wither away. But who could tell at first which plants would endure, and which would not?

Or consider the series of people depicted in Luke 9:57-62. Three different people offer to follow Jesus, or promise to do so on some condition or other. In every case, Jesus gently repulses them. One says, "I will follow you wherever you go," but Jesus promptly erects a barrier: "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head." I suppose the question we must ask ourselves is this: When was the last time that we repulsed someone who promised to follow Jesus, erecting barriers or high hurdles for their religious aspirations?

Or again, John speaks of "many people" who saw the signs Jesus was doing and who "believed in his name" (John 2:23). But Jesus recognized that their faith was spurious, and would not entrust himself to them. What was it about them that made their faith spurious?

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Of course, we must recognize that even the most discerning of us will sometimes make mistakes. Those of us who have been in the ministry for a few years (let alone for several decades) can remember people we have baptized whose professions of faith soon proved to be ephemeral. But unless we perceive the danger, we will actually foster spurious conversions. And this will have the further effect of engendering cynicism about conversion, or a false sense of security in those who have been through the system without really being regenerated. So the question returns: Granted that there are spurious conversions in the Bible, what criteria help us to determine whether a profession of faith is genuine?

I have space to mention two criteria, and then to offer some reflections on their practical outworking in evangelistic ministry in today's world.

The *first* criterion is remarkably penetrating, but does not yield quick results. It is the criterion of perseverance. Jesus told some who "believed" him, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples" (John 8:31). The apostle Paul writes to the Colossians to tell them that God has reconciled them to himself by Christ's physical body through death, to present them holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation, "if you continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel" (Col 1:23). The writer to the Hebrews affirms, "We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first" (Heb 3:14). Conversely, when some fail this test of perseverance, their very falling away may testify that "they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their

going showed that none of them belonged to us" (1 John 2:19). This criterion of perseverance, then, is powerful. But it is not an instant panacea, a tool that provides instant discernment. In the very nature of the case, perseverance takes time to disclose itself.

The *second* criterion emerges from the sheer diversity and creativity of Jesus' handling of people. One person he may command to sell all that he has, and give the proceeds to the poor; another he may instruct on who his neighbor is; to another he may tell of the visit of a Pharisee and of a publican to the temple, so as to show the nature of true contrition and faith, and to make clear who is truly justified; yet another is told that unless he forgives his brother, he cannot be forgiven himself. What is common to all these accounts, and a dozen more, is Jesus' unerring ability to get to the heart of what *stops* a particular individual from closing with Christ. The point is that genuine faith embraces genuine repentance, and the barriers to repentance vary greatly from person to person. For one person it is materialism; for another, it is the instinct of self-promotion and self-preservation that would rather argue about who the neighbor is than give help to him or receive help from him; for another, it is the religious arrogance that deludes itself into thinking that religious observance makes one fit for the kingdom of heaven; for another, it is the nurtured bitterness that finds it impossible to forgive. In every case, the proper Christian confession is "Jesus is Lord." The particular sins that defy his lordship, however, vary from person to person. For this reason, the Lord Jesus himself is so amazingly flexible and penetrating in his dealings with people. He sees through them, discerns where their true idols lie, and

focuses on the particular sins that are so binding and crippling to each individual. He may not say, "Go, call your husband and come back" (John 4:16) to the rich young ruler or to Mary Magdalene, but it was exactly what the Samaritan woman needed to hear.

These two criteria, then, the criterion of perseverance and what might be called the criterion of discerning the chief idol, are among the principal helps to evangelists seeking to discern whether or not a profession of faith is genuine.

Although these are certainly not the only criteria, it is worth thinking through how even these two may be of strategic help. That serious help is needed may be demonstrated by many things, but nothing is more potent than one particular pair of statistics. After George Whitefield had preached to great crowds in New England two hundred and fifty years ago, a careful check was made, ten years later, of those who had made profession of faith at some of his meetings, and it was found that about 85% were still following Christ faithfully. In other words, this report represents perseverance at a reasonably high order. By contrast, today's household names in evangelism usually report that, even according to their own figures, no more than 5% of those who make first-time professions of faith are found in faithful obedience a mere five years later. Something, surely, has gone wrong, when maintaining the high numbers of ostensible "converts" is more important than obtaining a more accurate discernment of who is genuinely converted.

That brings me to my final reflection. Those who have evangelized in many different cultural settings sooner or later discover that the barriers to genuine faith differ considerably from culture to culture.

(1) A thoughtful Hindu who trusts Christ finds it very difficult to avoid the syncretism that marks so much Hindu thought. The same Hindu who "accepts Christ" one day and verbally recognizes Jesus alone as Lord may be seen going into a temple devoted to Krishna two weeks later. When challenged, that person will probably say, without any self-conscious embarrassment, "Well, I'm about 60% Christian and 40% Hindu" (or some other division of the percentages). What is very often at stake in *genuine* conversion of a Hindu is a change in his or her operating story-line: that Hindu must not only accept certain things about Jesus, simply adding Jesus to the Hindu pantheon. Instead he or she must see that *over against* the inherited Hindu pantheon is set a different story, a true story, of one God, the Creator who made all things such that they are different than he is, of sin that is bound up with rebellion against this God, of God's actions of judgment and redemption reported through the Bible, and so forth. *For this is the only "story-line" in which the significance of Jesus makes Christian sense.* (Incidentally, that is why Paul's approach to evangelizing biblical illiterates in Athens [Acts 17:16-34] is so different from his approach to evangelizing Jews and Gentiles who are intimately familiar with what the Bible says [Acts 13:13-52]. Paul's apostolic insight and flexibility were a reflection of his Lord's insight and flexibility.)

(2) To bring a devout and knowledgeable Roman Catholic to an evangelical grasp of the gospel demands a rather different emphasis. In this case there is a shared grasp of many of the facts of the Bible (though some of them may be interpreted differently), and a fair bit of shared theology (e.g., one God, Trinitarianism,

creation, the fall, the deity of Christ, and much more). The differences can be summed up by the three “solos” of the Reformation: salvation is by grace *alone*, it is received through faith *alone*, and the revelatory authority base that defines this faith is Scripture *alone*. Often one is not certain that a Roman Catholic has come to enduring evangelical faith unless those touchstones, however cast, are absorbed and appreciated.

(3) Nowadays in evangelizing university students who are postmodern relativists, the criterion for genuine faith is a little different. Just because a student says something like the following does not necessarily mean that he or she has become a Christian: “Yes, I see that Jesus is God and man, that he came into the world and died on the cross to pay for my sin. I do believe that he rose from the dead the third day. By his grace I have turned from my sin and trusted him as my Savior and Lord.” Why not? Because in postmodern epistemology, all these utterances might well be part of a larger, experiential “try it and see” approach that does not last very long. It might well be embedded in a broader outlook that is essentially pluralistic. Thus the student may be saying, in effect, “I believe all these things to be true, as I join this interesting religious community. Of course, I reserve the right to try other religious communities. After all, they all have their own insight and truth too, and who am I to say that they are mistaken?” A suitable criterion, therefore, may be an additional confession: “And I believe that there is no other way by which a human being may be reconciled to God.” For a postmodern relativist, that marks a decisive shift.

By arguing this way, am I surreptitiously *adding* to the gospel? No, of course

not. I am merely unpacking elements that inhere in the biblical gospel. To return to the two criteria by which I began: I am insisting that genuine commitment to Christ perseveres, and that the gospel, genuinely appropriated, always overturns the cherished idol to which any person clings, whether that idol is the worldview of Hinduism, the inherited salvation-structures of Roman Catholicism, or the pluralistic outlook of much post-modernism.

So one important question we must raise whenever we engage in thoughtful evangelism on our own turf is this: Granted that there are spurious conversions in the Bible, what criteria will help me, *on my particular patch*, to discern that a profession of faith is genuine? How will reflection on such matters improve my presentation of the gospel here, on my particular patch? For instance, if you serve in a traditional SBC church located in the Bible belt, what inducements, social pressures, and traditions actually *foster* spurious conversions in that environment, and need, therefore, to be confronted in faithful gospel witness and preaching?

SBJT: How important is the role of the pastor in world evangelization?

Al Jackson: The pastor’s role in world evangelization is absolutely crucial. When the pastor of a local church has a burning passion for God to be glorified among all the nations, that church, in time, will develop a passion for world evangelization. When the pastor has little interest in world evangelization, the church he serves will have little interest in seeing the gospel of Christ proclaimed to all the nations of the earth.

Almost one hundred years ago missionary statesman John R. Mott wrote,

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At those times when the Church made her greatest missionary advances, the pastors were putting forth their whole strength in the effort to extend her sway. So, too, when there have been periods of neglect and indifference concerning the worldwide plans of Christ, the pastors have been showing a lack of enthusiasm on the subject. It is not a question of the location of the pastor or of his special natural ability. Whenever you find a pastor with overflowing missionary zeal and knowledge, you will find an earnest missionary church.¹

Mott's words are no less true today than when he penned them. The choke point in the task of world evangelization is not the failure of the missionaries who serve internationally. Nor is it found in the administrators and trustees of our mission boards. Furthermore, the problem is not found in the membership of our churches. The weak link in world evangelization is found, with rare exception, in the pulpits of our churches.

The biblical mandate for world evangelization is clear and cannot be avoided without disobeying the commands of our Lord. In the sovereign plan of God, the pastor has the awesome responsibility to mobilize the members of Christ's church to take the gospel to all the nations. He can and, by God's grace, should be a mighty catalyst calling his congregation to the evangelization of all the people groups of the earth.

For the pastor to be God's agent in mobilizing the church for world evangelization, he must first honestly address the lordship issue in his own life and service. It is impossible for a pastor to preach with authority and credibility on world missions if he has placed geographical limitations on his own ministry for Christ. For

a pastor to call his people to missionary service for Christ in Asia or Africa or Latin America, he must be willing to go to those places if the Lord of the Harvest so bids him. Refusal to follow the Lord Jesus anywhere he leads is treason and is a denial of the lordship of Christ. Until the pastor has dealt with this issue in his own life, he is unprepared and probably unwilling to call others to follow Jesus to the ends of the earth.

A second issue the pastor faces in calling the members of his congregation to world evangelization is the question of lifestyle. Tragically, missionary advancement is hampered by the lack of financial resources. All the resources needed to take the gospel to the nations have already been given to us by God. Far too often such resources are used locally, where the gospel is widely proclaimed, while multitudes around the world slip into eternity without ever hearing of God's promise of salvation through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Americans are the most affluent people in the world. Christians in the United States share in this material wealth. Often without realizing what is taking place, Christians succumb to the American dream, which advocates that a person's standard of living should rise to match his income. However, the teaching of Jesus is counter-cultural on the matter of lifestyle. Jesus warned his disciples, "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasure in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal" (Matt 6:19-20).

The pastor has the obligation to call church members to radical discipleship in

the stewardship of material possessions. Millions of dollars that are desperately needed for international missions will never be given until the pastor faithfully and fearlessly declares the counsel of God in calling God's people to give generously and sacrificially for the cause of world evangelization. As affluent American Christians begin to adjust their standards of living to free up additional financial resources to support a rapidly increasing missionary force, they will experience the joy of knowing that they are making an eternal difference in the lives of multitudes around the world.

A third issue faced by the pastor who desires to mobilize the church in evangelizing the world is the matter of leadership. While much can and should be delegated to the men and women of the mission organizations of the church, the pastor alone has the ear of the entire congregation. If the local church is to become a Great Commission church, it is imperative for the pastor to lead the way. He must wave the banner for world evangelization. He must blow the trumpet and sound the call to take the gospel to the nations. Failure to do so will result in a meager response by God's people. However, when the pastor faithfully leads the way toward the cause of world evangelization, the members of the congregation will follow.

The pastor's pulpit ministry should include messages on the missionary mandate of the Bible. In fact, if he systematically preaches through the Word of God and is faithful to expound the true meaning of the text, he will be unable to avoid preaching on God's purpose to be glorified among the nations.

The pastor leads best by example. In this area of rapid global travel, the pastor

can and should take his people on short-term mission trips. The pastor whose heart beats for world evangelization will encourage his people to join him in praying that the Lord of the Harvest will raise up missionaries from their church. The pastor will gladly welcome furloughing missionaries to the church and give them opportunity to tell of the mighty acts of God that are taking place around the world.

A Great Commission pastor will lead his people to do great exploits for God. He must not flag or fail. When some within the congregation oppose him—and they will—the pastor must keep his focus on the goal of making disciples of Jesus Christ from all the nations. The pastor who has a passion for world evangelization will experience the ultimate joy and reward that comes to those who invest themselves wholeheartedly and passionately in declaring the glory of God among all the nations.

ENDNOTE

¹ John R. Mott, *The Pastor and Modern Missions—Plea for Leadership in World Evangelization* (New York: Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions, 1904) 51.

SBJT: How can we help Christians to internalize the truth of the gospel in an age uninterested in truth?

Ajith Fernando: One of the most surprising discoveries I made while I was working on a commentary on Acts a few years ago was that, in the early church, the first evangelists were both miracle workers and apologists. I had known that Stephen and Paul exhibited this combination. I did not realize that Peter's speeches in Acts show that he was also a solid apologist.

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The church today is suffering from much ill health because it has not been able to effectively combine these two emphases.

Today, many people are attracted to Christ because of his perceived ability and willingness to meet their felt needs. In response, many churches are increasingly adopting approaches that focus on meeting those felt needs. These approaches range from emphasizing God's miraculous power in answering prayer to implementing a seeker sensitive model of church. There are biblical precedents for these approaches. They are undoubtedly appropriate means of arresting the attention of people, especially in an age when people aren't very interested in truth.

We have, however, become so enamoured by the felt needs message that we are neglecting other aspects of the gospel, like God's sovereignty, his hatred of sin, the necessity and centrality of the cross, and the call to holiness and ethical purity. Most evangelical preachers believe and even preach these things. The emphasis on power and felt needs has been such, however, that many people primarily associate the Christian faith with what Christ has done to meet felt needs like healing, financial security, or peace. This is evident when I ask recent converts what it was that led them to become Christians. They usually mention some need that God met that made them want to believe in him.

About 70% of the members of our church are converts from Buddhism. Almost all of them were brought to church by other Christians when they had a personal need. They came to receive prayer for their need (we pray for needs presented by those at the service during the pastoral prayer time on Sundays). After their initial introduction to our church,

many kept coming. Usually after about a year, they are baptized as Christians. During one Sunday service, I asked the congregation what the greatest need or problem of human beings was. I received a wide range of answers focusing on the need for shelter, food, clothing, health, and a secure future. I kept telling the people that they were missing the most important need. Finally a lady mentioned the need for forgiveness of sin and a relationship with God. When I said that this was the answer I was looking for, everyone nodded in agreement. The fact remained, however, that this was not what they thought about first when asked what the main problem was for which the gospel is the answer.

We try very hard to present the "whole counsel of God" to seekers coming to our church. My wife leads an evangelistic Bible study with Buddhists where she takes them through the message of the Bible in chronological order. She begins with the Old Testament revelation of God and his dealings with humans before covering the New Testament. If our people responded to my questions as they did, in spite of this prior instruction, how much more serious this misunderstanding of the central message of the gospel might be in churches where the predominant emphasis in preaching and worship is on God's power and his ability to meet felt needs!

The result of this misplaced emphasis is an unhealthy church. While we have seen a significant turning to God by non-Christians in many Asian nations, the church in these nations also continues to exhibit some of the same problems as their societies at large, such as lying and prejudice. In Asia most people view the gods in somewhat of a magical way: they do

favors for those who follow the prescribed rituals. They do not generally demand ethical purity. When Asians become Christians, it is easy for them to transfer this idea to their understanding of the one and only God. I believe that this has happened today. Many view Christianity primarily as a means to prosperity and health for those who follow prescribed rituals like tithing, prayer, and fasting.

How can we ensure that the Christian worldview and ethic become a part of the life and thought of converts to Christ in this era? First, we need to work hard at presenting all the key elements of the gospel in a relevant and interesting manner. Even though we may continue to gain the attention of people by addressing their felt needs, we must follow the New Testament practice of conscientiously presenting the key foundational truths of the gospel. Since the gospel has been revealed to us in truth categories, we must seek to overcome people's initial indifference to truth. We can be confident that the truth of the gospel is powerful in mediating God's saving grace to all believers because it is the truth that sets us free (John 8:32).

Second, we need Word-centered small groups. In most small groups today, Christians engage predominantly in talking about their needs and sharing testimonies about answers to prayer. There is little earnest grappling with the Word and its implications for daily life. My experience in working with our church and with Youth for Christ in Sri Lanka, however, bears out the need for such grappling. In Sri Lanka, most Buddhists recite daily their resolve not to lie, and there is a lot of preaching on the high ethic of Buddhism. Nevertheless, most people, including many professing Christians, practice lying as a normal part of their daily life.

On the other hand, Christians who belong to a small group where the Word is studied and applied to their personal lives generally stand as a significant exception. Their lives also manifest general growth in Christian understanding and character.

Third, we should make our worship truth-oriented. Since there is a natural spiritual orientation in the east and a new postmodern interest in spirituality and the experiential side of life in the west, the church could take advantage of the situation by making worship a means of communicating theological truth. Music is the language of the heart. When good theological truth is put to music, the musical medium often facilitates the entrance of the truth into our minds and then into our hearts. Moreover, if we believe that theology must result in doxology, then the truths we believe in should be reflected in the whole range of our praise, self-examination, confession, intercession, instruction, and acts of dedication.

The sad fact is that worship songs are often chosen more on the basis of popularity than content. In my language (Sinhala) there are very few new songs and hymns that describe the meaning of the atonement. Since Buddhists find this doctrine very difficult to understand, we should be singing more, not fewer, songs on the meaning of the death of Christ. On the other hand, the chorus, "Is there anything too hard for the Lord?" is very popular among Sinhala-speaking Christians and is generally applied to healing or the resolution of problems like unemployment and economic hardship. While God can certainly meet those needs, other emphases deserve much more attention. One way to achieve this redirection is by linking a familiar theme to a neglected theme. I attempted such a redirection at a

prayer vigil recently. I combined the chorus “Is there anything too hard for the Lord?” with “Let the beauty of Jesus be seen in me” several times. By doing so, I communicated to my church that Christ-likeness is a possibility because nothing is too hard for the Lord.

In all three of my recommendations above, the essential point is that we must present the whole counsel of God to all whom God brings our way. We must avoid neglecting important aspects of God’s truth in our preoccupation with meeting people’s felt needs. Our goal is that our churches proclaim, believe, worship, and live according to the fullness of God’s gracious revelation.

SBJT: In your opinion, what evangelistic ministry is the most effective worldwide?

Robert Coleman: I believe that reproducing disciples through Spirit-led relationships is the most effective evangelistic ministry. Although this approach is overlooked by the media, and often by the church as well, it is the way God has made a people for his glory since he said to Adam and Eve: “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it” (Gen 1:28). God intends to be worshiped and served universally (Ps 145:10; Rom 1:20, 26), and he accomplishes this through the reproduction of sons and daughters who learn to love him.

Even though our ancestors failed in this mission, God’s plan does not change, nor is his discipling strategy annulled. Lest we forget, this message is included in the Law of Moses: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them

when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. . . . Write them on the door posts of your houses and your gates” (Deut 6:5-9).

In addition to populating the earth, the sacred relationship of marriage is the means God uses to teach the Law of love to each successive generation. The priests and prophets were expected to enhance love for the Lord, but the primary responsibility for discipleship rested upon parents. This explains why there were always some in Israel, though usually only a remnant, which never bowed their knee to Baal, even during times when the priests and/or kings were corrupt. Thank God for those faithful parents who disciplined their children.

Jesus brings this plan into climatic focus. He made it known that he came to save fallen humanity and bring them into his eternal kingdom. Those who followed him were, in turn, sent into the world to take the good news into all the world. (Matt 28:19-20; John 17:18; Acts 1:8). Jesus gives them specific instructions to make sure that they are not confused about the nature of their task: “Make disciples.” In doing so, they can be assured of his continual presence and that they go forth in his authority. The other related, specified activities—witnessing, baptizing, teaching, and preaching—are realized when we make reproductive disciples of Christ. Disciples are more than converts. The word means “learners,” as in the sense of “apprentice” and, “always implies the existence of a personal attachment which shapes the whole life of the one disciplined.”¹

Discipling is our Lord’s key to reaching the world. Persons who follow Christ will grow in his knowledge and likeness, and thereby become involved in his min-

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istry. Inevitably, disciples will learn to make disciples and lead them in turn to do the same. This was Jesus' method. Through the process of multiplication, the world will have opportunity to know the gospel.

The Great Commission is, therefore, demonstrated in the way Jesus made disciples. In the midst of his busy ministry to the multitudes—healing, teaching, preaching—he was intent on teaching those who followed him. In particular, he chose twelve to be with him in a special way. Among the twelve, Peter, James, and John had an even closer relationship with him. This underscores an important principle: the smaller the group, the greater the opportunity for learning.

In this close association, much like a family, the disciples both witnessed and learned what it means to become a servant. Moreover, Jesus found ways for them to take part in his work, enlarging upon their assignments as they grew in understanding. He kept watch over them to see how they were coming along, building in them a sense of accountability, and teaching them that to whom much is given, much is required. Before ascending, he reviewed his plan with them and assured them of his abiding presence and power by the Spirit.

The Great Commission is not a call to some specialized missionary vocation; it is an intentional lifestyle for the church. How it finds expression, of course, will depend on the circumstances and unique gifts of each person. But the principles that underlie Jesus' method of discipling are guidelines for every believer to follow.

We can see this way of life unfolding in the rapidly growing church in Acts. In this new situation, notice how the church prays for God's direction and obeys his

prompting; how they meet together in small groups; how they bear one another's burdens; how they boldly share their faith; how the priesthood of all believers comes alive; and in spite of constant harassment, how Spirit-filled witnesses daily multiply as people are saved.

This same pattern is evident in varying degrees during seasons of spiritual revival throughout the history of the Church. The Moravian, Pietist, Puritan, and Wesleyan movements are examples. More importantly, this lifestyle is still evident in some places today, particularly where churches are experiencing real growth.

I am not inferring that discipleship evangelism is limited to the pattern I am presenting. Certainly, the formal ministries of the church form the basis for regular worship and teaching. Personal discipleship builds on these more formal structures, while at the same time, bringing new life and leadership to them.

Dispel the notion that relational ministries minimize the influence of the pulpit. On the contrary, people growing in Christ want, even demand, strong preaching. Moreover, they will go the extra mile to bring their lost friends to hear the Word of God proclaimed in power. The best evangelists and pastors I know do all they can to encourage discipleship.

One might wonder why individual discipleship is not more widely practiced. The answer cannot be that it is difficult to understand. Making disciples is just like raising children. Potentially, then, every child born into the world has already acquired a basic knowledge of this discipline. Even those raised in dysfunctional families can learn something about this from their negative experiences.

I am convinced that our problem is not

a lack of information, but of commitment. This is where I have been most deficient. While making disciples may be simple, it is costly. It takes time. It requires endless patience. Other things must be rearranged to give it priority. There is a cross in it. A shepherd who leads the sheep must be willing to lay down his life for them. It takes this kind of love, by the grace of God, to bring children to maturity. When they reach that goal, they themselves are ready to reproduce.

What is so obvious in the natural world thus becomes the pattern in our spiritual development. How could we ever miss it? Yet I am afraid that in our struggle to bring growing disciples to maturity, we should become so absorbed in the process that we stop short of the goal. Hoping to avoid that danger, I wrote a book on discipleship a few years ago titled, *The Master Plan of Evangelism*. Until disciples catch this vision of reproduction and begin to transmit it to a new generation, we hinder God's plan to reach all nations.

It is this dimension of discipleship that brings forth productive evangelism. Although our own efforts seem feeble, we can go to bed at night with a smile on our face because we know that God will not be defeated in his purpose of creation and redemption. However long it takes, God will gather a people to praise him from every tongue, tribe, and nation; a people made beautiful in love, "and the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea" (Isa 11:9; Hab 2:14; cf. Gen 12:1-3; Rev 7:9).

ENDNOTES

¹K. H. Rengstorf, "mathētēs," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmanns, 1967) 4:441.

SBJT: Are Southern Baptists really evangelistic?

John Mark Terry: When I think of the Southern Baptist Convention and its evangelistic emphasis, I'm reminded of the story, "The Emperor's New Clothes." In the story two rascals convinced a vain emperor that they could make him a special suit of clothes. They claimed they could make cloth so fine that it would be invisible to the ignorant and incapable. The emperor eventually paraded through the town in his "new clothes," but no one wanted to admit that they could not see the cloth. Finally, a child cried out, "The emperor is naked," and everyone admitted that indeed he was. The emperor soon realized the truth, but he continued his procession rather than admit his embarrassing mistake.

Most observers would say the Southern Baptist Convention is the most evangelistic denomination in North America. For their part, Southern Baptists think of themselves as evangelistic. Truly, we talk and write a lot about evangelism. Consider the following examples. Our North American Mission Board has an Evangelism Division. Every state Baptist convention has a Department of Evangelism. Every Baptist association has a Director of Evangelism. We publish many books and lots of materials on evangelism, and most state conventions sponsor annual evangelism conferences. Seminarians are required to take courses in evangelism. Evangelism is obviously a key element in our denominational program. The question is "Is evangelism a key element in our churches' practice?" Are Southern Baptists really clothed with the robes of evangelism?

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The Problem

A careful analysis of denominational statistics reveals that the Southern Baptist Convention really is not very evangelistic. We merely appear to be evangelistic in comparison to other denominations that do even less. The North American Mission Board reports that during 1999, 6,917 Southern Baptist churches did not baptize anyone.¹ Thousands more baptized five people or less. In a given statistical year, Southern Baptist churches will baptize between 400,000 to 450,000 persons. That sounds like a lot of people; however, when you learn that there are 45,000 churches and church-type missions in the Convention, you can see that the churches do not even average one baptism per month. The gross numbers are even less impressive when they are analyzed. The Evangelism Division of the Home Mission Board (now the North American Mission Board) commissioned a study of baptisms in the Southern Baptist Convention in 1992-93. The research showed that 54.1 percent of baptisms were performed on people making rededications or who were transferring from another denomination. Only 40.5 percent of the baptisms were in response to conversion.² This figure includes the children of church members. It is clear that Southern Baptists have had little success in reducing the number of unsaved persons in the United States.

Win Arn estimates that 80-85 percent of the Protestant churches in the United States are plateaued or declining. Southern Baptist churches are doing a bit better; only 70 percent of our churches are plateaued or declining.³ In 1996 the Home Mission Board published a profile of a typical Southern Baptist church. It had 233 members, though 55 were non-resident, and it had baptized 5 persons in the past

year. The study concluded that the typical Southern Baptist church is in decline.⁴ In summary, it is clear that Southern Baptist churches are failing in the work of evangelism.

The Causes

There are several reasons why Southern Baptist churches are performing badly in regard to evangelism.

Theological Factors. It is sad to admit, but some pastors and churches no longer have a conversionist theology. That is, they no longer believe that those who do not believe in Christ need to be converted. Another factor creeping in is universalism. The academy and the mass media in North America have aggressively pushed relativism and pluralism. As a result, many Baptists no longer believe the lost are doomed to eternal separation from God. They believe there are many different ways to approach God. Even if they would deny this when questioned, they live as functional universalists in that they feel no compulsion to tell others about salvation in Christ. The greatest sin in postmodern America seems to be intolerance, and many Baptists have accepted that concept. They would rather be politically correct than biblically correct.

Cultural Factors. The mass media has also pushed evangelicals to make faith a private matter, something only to be discussed with family and intimate friends. Another cultural factor is that the majority of people in North America do not understand Christian jargon and are thus unable to understand what the church is proclaiming.

Demographic Factors. Many churches fail to evangelize their communities because the congregations cannot identify with their communities. For example, it

is common to see an Anglo-Saxon congregation existing in a community that is predominantly Hispanic.

Geographical Factors. The majority of churches that baptize no one are rural churches. Frequently, they minister in communities that are losing population.

Attitudinal Factors. Numerous churches fail to evangelize their communities because they have poor self-esteem. They feel small and powerless. Other churches pride themselves on their warm, intimate fellowship. The problem is that newcomers may have great difficulty penetrating this circle of friendship. Some churches suffer from "traditionitis." They live in the 1950s, and wonder why visitors are not attracted to their worship services and programs.⁵

Solutions

Thankfully, the picture does not have to remain as dark as has been painted. Churches, even small, rural churches, can reach the lost of their communities. What should they do? The first thing to do is to become intentional about evangelism. Many churches hope to win the lost, but they do not have a concrete plan to accomplish this. So, the first step is prayer. The second step is to make a plan. When Christians pray individually and corporately, churches see more people saved. Third, churches need to organize outreach programs. The time is past when lost people will come to church in numbers; Christians have to go out and find them. Fourth, pastors need to teach their people how to witness and then lead them to do it. Fifth, churches need to use their Sunday school classes or small group ministries as entry points to the congregation. If churches will just do these basic things, then the perception of evangelism can become the re-

ality.⁶

ENDNOTES

¹Richie C. Stanley, NAMB Strategic Information Researcher, E-mail message to the author, 5 January 2001.

²Sarah Zimmerman, "Transfers, Rededications 54.1 Percent of Baptisms," *The Baptist Messenger*, 18 May 1995, 13.

³Win Arn, "Paradigms: Are They Working for You or Against You?" *Growing Churches* (April 1992) 12.

⁴"Smallness and Decline Typify Southern Baptist Churches," *Research Review*, 6 (Fall 1996) 1.

⁵Tony Pappas, "Avoiding the Pitfalls of Thinking Small," *Net Results*, September 2000, 3-5.

⁶See John Mark Terry, *Church Evangelism* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1997), for more information on methods of church evangelism.