

Five Misconceptions about Evangelism

By Bob Young

Note: The idea for this article was suggested by the “Five Myths” series published by crossway.org. The original article outlining five myths about evangelism was authored by Kathleen Nielson (PhD, Vanderbilt University).

A year ago, I posted on Facebook a summary of Crossway’s “Five Myths about Evangelism,” but I did not write a corresponding article to post on the website. Here is the summary of Dr. Nielson’s myths:

- Myth #1: Evangelism is something I do myself.
- Myth #2: We don’t have to speak the gospel—we just live it. Or wait and earn the right to speak.
- Myth #3: Evangelism requires special training.
- Myth #4: It’s better not to talk about hell.
- Myth #5: I’ll get to it eventually.

When I reposted the article as a Facebook memory last week, the post went virtually unnoticed, based on the visible responses and sharing.

Therefore, I decided to write an article for the website. This article analyzes in detail some misconceptions about evangelism, seeks insights into how to improve the evangelistic efforts of the local church, and will be available for future readers. I hope it will receive broader notice. The misconceptions I list are generally parallel to the “myths” of the original article, but the expanded explanations and treatments are mine.

#1 -- Evangelism is something every Christian is called to do alone, or at least with little support.

A common misconception -- every Christian has to master the entire process of making disciples so that every Christian is responsible for bringing another person to the Lord.

Here is the biblical reality -- evangelism is the work of the church. Evangelism is the work of the body of Christ. Members have been given specific gifts, all of which work together to bring people to Jesus. Some members have the gift of meeting people, others have the gift of developing spiritual interest. Some can teach, some have the gift of hospitality. Some have the gift of support and encouragement. The members of the church must work together to bring people to Jesus.

Studies show that the average church cannot assimilate more than 10% of its membership annually (and that requires great effort!). The local church does not need to think in terms of every member bringing one—the church will not know what to do with that many people!

Problems with the misconception -- the Great Commission becomes a heavy burden when we do it alone, praying, laboring away to find and teach someone about Jesus. The misconception makes Christianity difficult, hard, overwhelming, lonely. We need one another, we need the giftedness of the body to do what we individually do not easily and naturally do. The church that expects every member to develop the gift of contact will seldom evangelize effectively.

Here are practical ideas -- the ministry in Lansing, Michigan began with 150-175 members (plus about 50 children were being brought by bus). Over 10+ years, the church almost tripled nearly 450 members, largely the result of 243 baptisms. We never had over half a dozen “evangelism teachers” during this time. Every member used their gifts to support evangelism and discipleship!

The ministry in Fort Gibson likewise began with about 175 in attendance. Over eight years the church grew to over 300 (and another 50 were added as a result of a campaign in the 9th year after we had concluded our ministry and began serving in Christian higher education). The church doubled in nine years, there were 148 baptisms according to my records. We never had over half a dozen “evangelism teachers” during that time. Every member used their gifts to support evangelism.

#2 -- Evangelism can be done by simply being a good example and waiting until someone asks us about Jesus.

A common misconception -- evangelism can be done by being present; it is not necessary to speak the gospel. A popular version of this misconception suggests that having lots of benevolent works, ministry projects,

fellowship activities, and other non-evangelism activities will cause evangelism to occur. That this misconception is alive and well is demonstrated by the large number of peripheral activities that are a part of the life of many U.S. churches. Many churches simply never get around to evangelizing.

Here is the biblical reality – the Good News is a message and it has to be spoken! Unexplained good works done by Christians are little different and have no significant impact in comparison to good works done by non-Christians. The power of salvation is in the gospel (Rom. 1:16). Faith is developed by hearing the message (Rom. 10:17).

Problems with the misconception – While the “presence” of Christians being good examples is important, evangelism depends on proclamation and persuasion. The Good News about Jesus must be heard and accepted. “Presence” may pique interest, but eventually we Christians have to get around to speaking about Jesus. This truth explains why the giftedness of the body is so important in evangelism. A church that is trying to juggle too many non-evangelism balls will struggle to evangelize.

Here are practical ideas – the proclamation of the gospel message was at the heart of the growth I described under the first point. The gospel was the foundation of the teaching of the church in Bible classes, sermons, discipleship classes, small group studies, and personal Bible studies. The power of the gospel provided the base for the weekly call to worship, public prayers, and daily conversations with other believers and with non-believers. When the gospel has transformed our lives, it is hard not to talk about it! And sharing the gospel with someone is much easier if that person has heard us continually talking about the gospel day after day.

The local church could do much to increase the amount of “speaking” simply by teaching members how to “talk the gospel” in every aspect of their lives. Jan and I have a number of friends around the world with whom we love to spend time, because we know that the conversations we share will be centered on Jesus’ role in our lives. How encouraging! I love to speak and to be reminded of Jesus’ presence, place, and power in my life and the lives of those I love in the Lord. Never underestimate the power of your words in daily life – in the market, on the plane, at the restaurant, in all of the relationships of your life!

#3 – Getting the church involved in evangelism requires special programs, teaching, and training.

A common misconception – evangelism can never become a natural activity in a local church. When church members believe that evangelism requires special programs and training, evangelism will seldom become a natural part of the body life of the church. A common belief is that evangelism is the work of specially-prepared, specially-trained Christians like the ministry staff. Said another way, the average member really cannot have much impact in evangelism.

Here is the biblical reality – the Good News is a message to be shared, and we do not have to be trained experts to share the message. In the Bible, those who had been touched by Jesus went everywhere talking about how Jesus had changed their lives. The overflowing joy of Jesus is visible in the lives of disciples. While training is helpful, honoring the giftedness of the body does not require that every member sign on to a program or receive certain training.

Problems with the misconception – When church members do not understand how their role in evangelism is informed by their gifts, and how evangelism lets them use their gifts in a concerted way within the body, the church fails to do what it was naturally designed to do. The church fails to fulfill God’s eternal purpose for its existence. “When one makes a church, one seldom gets disciples; when one makes disciples, one always gets a church.”

Here are practical ideas – the proclamation of the gospel message is natural. When we find a new product that works, we tell everyone who will listen. In the same way, when Christians regularly see God’s presence in their lives, that subject finds its way into daily conversation. When we regularly read the word of God and think about the Good News, that message will continually be part of our conversation.

#4 – Evangelism is best done with a softer, gentler message, saving things like commitment and hell for later.

A common misconception – people won’t listen to the gospel message if we tell them about hell. We need to share a message that will attract them and appeal to them where they are.

Here is the biblical reality – sharing the gospel means sharing ALL of the gospel. The Bible tells us about God's wrath regarding sin and clearly teaches that those who reject Jesus as their Lord and Savior will experience eternal condemnation rather than eternal bliss. One can hardly be true to the message of Jesus and exclude his message of judgment.

Problems with the misconception – Jesus' message of judgment and condemnation is so difficult to accept (a loving God certainly would not send anyone to hell!) that even many Christians today choose not to believe in hell. A softer, gentler message certainly resonates in U.S. culture and among upper- and middle-class Christians who are looking for a Christian faith that is consistent with the developing values of North American popular culture. The problem is that such a message is inconsistent with the gospel call to sacrificial discipleship.

Here are practical ideas – What is needed is a return to the biblical mission of the church, a focus on God's eternal plan and purpose for the church, so that the gospel power of God is applied to human lives to bring salvation from sin, making clear Jesus' demand for sacrificial discipleship, and cultivating the desire to advance the message of Christ into all the world.

When mission work focuses on God's mission and faithfully proclaims the gospel in its entirety, people come to Jesus and we see more and more outposts established from which the message of salvation through Jesus can echo forth into all the world.

#5 – Little by little, I am thinking more and more about evangelism, and someday I will really be able to do it.

A common misconception – I will do it when I am fully prepared, someday! Delaying our involvement in evangelism is both selfish and self-deluding.

Here is the biblical reality – sharing the gospel is an immediately and daily need. If people are lost without the gospel of Jesus, there is nothing more important than making sure that as many as possible are contacted.

Problems with the misconception – It has often been noted that procrastination is the tool of Satan. One problem is that Christians are inactive because the processes present in most churches do not encourage them to use their gifts to advance the gospel.

Here are practical ideas – What is needed is a holistic approach to evangelism, capable of dealing with the misconceptions presented above.

Evangelism is the work of the body of Christ and is best done with all of the members using their giftedness.

Evangelism seeks to share the message of Jesus, using those with the gift of evangelistic teaching.

Evangelism is the natural result of a church being church, honoring every member.

Evangelism must not avoid difficult and challenging truths. Evangelism depends on the whole counsel of God.

Evangelism based on these practical ideas can begin immediately!