

What I want Christians to know about evangelism

By Bob Young

I struggled with the title of this article. I want you to read; I want you to learn. The article was originally titled, "What I learned about evangelism." The point is this – when we Christians understand evangelism in both biblical and practical ways, it makes all the difference! When I learned about evangelism, it made all the difference in my ministry – and in the lives of hundreds and thousands of people around the world! To help you understand what I learned and how I learned it, I need to tell you briefly about my ministry journey.

When I first decided to preach, I dreamed of multitudes. I did not know how it would happen, but I thought and prayed and dreamed about ministry that would reach multitudes. I began preaching in a small town in southwestern Arkansas. The most evangelistic thing that happened in that little church was the annual campaign or gospel meeting. As a young preacher fresh out of school, I admired the preachers who preached in those campaigns. I spent much of my two years in that church increasing my Bible knowledge and trying to learn how to preach.

My dream of multitudes was sufficient cause to leave the small town for the city when that invitation came. I dreamed of multitudes. The urban church building was surrounded by people. We knocked every door in the surrounding neighborhoods. We mailed Bible teaching to every home. I got my first taste of foreign mission work in my interactions with the three full-time missionaries that were supported by that urban church – missionaries working in Austria, Italy, and Japan. Thinking of my dream of multitudes, the work in a southern urban city where many people already claimed to be Christians was disappointing. When the opportunity came to move to the northern U.S. where fewer people claimed to be Christians, I jumped at the opportunity.

In the northern U.S. I worked in the suburbs of Detroit. The primary evangelism tool of the church was a bus program in which we sought to reach those who lived around us. During the two years I was there, a new city was established within a mile of the church building – what was formerly a township that was six miles square was incorporated as a city! Attendance numbers reached record highs as a result of 200 children being brought in on buses, but my dream of multitudes was being fulfilled. After two years in the hustle and bustle of the Detroit area, I moved to the state capital.

During a dozen years of ministry in Lansing, I learned that multitudes are groupings of individuals. I came to see that reaching the multitudes will happen only as the result of reaching multiplied individuals. That lesson led to another: the way to reach the multitudes is to reach those individuals who will reach more individuals. Jesus' instructions to make disciples by baptizing and then teaching will lead to making disciples who will make disciples. Two lessons led to a third: I learned that I cannot personally bring multitudes to Jesus – I need the help of every other Christian sharing the gospel.

Those three lessons were for me a great revelation. I started to think and pray differently. I saw that the great need is to think together about how we can most effectively share the gospel in the context of the body of Christ. I learned that evangelism is not an individual task.

I am amazed at how many lessons I learned over a short period of time. I learned that evangelism is not about events and numbers -- it is not about how many people will come to the building for an impersonal encounter or a non-spiritual activity. I learned that evangelism depends on identifying and connecting either with people who have spiritual hunger and interest or with people in whom spiritual interest can be developed. I learned that outreach activities should be designed to pique spiritual desires, hungers, and interest. The local church began to develop, plan, and host interactive opportunities that generated and supported spiritual openness. I learned that evangelism is about opportunities to listen, ask questions, and talk about the shared faith journey. I also came to see that many of our "attractional" activities are too distracting to help develop spiritual connections. I began to think about and develop evangelistic activities that were more focused and had fewer distractions.

The lessons I was learning led me to ask new questions. Across the next forty years of ministry, five question sets proved to be extremely important.

First: where, when, how can I have INTENTIONAL FAITH CONVERSATIONS? How can I best introduce intentional faith conversations? And in every intention conversation, is this a time to listen or is this a time when I can share my own personal faith story?

Second, and related: Where, when, how can I start a SPIRITUAL CONVERSATION? I had to learn how to start spiritual conversations. How can we start spiritual conversations? How can I teach other Christians the art of starting spiritual conversations?

Third: How can I lead the conversation in order to DEVELOP SPIRITUAL INTEREST? In many settings, one must ask whether the context is conducive to developing spiritual interest?

Fourth: How can I evaluate PHYSICAL AND SPIRITUAL NEEDS – whether recognized and unrecognized? And in parallel to the previous point, is this a place where we can converse sufficiently to evaluate needs?

Fifth: How can I exercise EVANGELISTIC PERCEPTION? How can I perceive the condition of the heart? Is this setting the right place to have this spiritual conversation? How can I find the right place to insert the seed of the gospel into a needy heart?

Once I learned to think in terms of these questions, I began to think about campaigns and preaching opportunities in a different light. I was less enamored with bus programs and mass evangelism efforts. I began to think about domestic evangelism and the possibilities in the mission field differently. The results did not come immediately, but God has blessed my journey and the results are amazing.

First, the continuation of my ministry journey led to a church that tripled over ten years of ministry, followed by a church that doubled in nine years. Instead of seeing a few people come to Christ each year, I was seeing dozens, one year the number was one a week, fifties, then hundreds. When I began working in Christian higher education, I saw the students in my evangelism class experience the thrill of bringing people to Jesus. I saw churches learn how to grow again during my interim ministries.

When I retired from the academic arena (and even before), I became active in Latin American mission work. I have taught and applied the same lessons, asking the same questions. I have shared the lessons I have learned with Christians in at least a dozen countries in Central and South America. So simple, so powerful!

Here is a bullet-point summary of my journey.

- In the last 20 years of my work in local ministry, the two churches I worked with averaged 20+ baptisms per year (approximately 10% of attendance), and in both cases the church began to grow again.
- Dozens baptized every year in the local church work (in the difficult mission field of Michigan!).
- I began sharing with dozens of Christians how to share their faith, being invited to a number of local churches in Michigan.
- I no longer have the number of baptisms that occurred in the other churches – I know there were dozens of baptisms each year.
- Over 10 years in Michigan, at least 14 new churches were established in the state.
- Almost 250 were baptized in the local work in Michigan; the church tripled.
- New mission fields were identified; new churches were established
- In my next ministry, almost 150 were baptized in the local work, the church doubled
- Approximately 50 were baptized in a campaign
- In the university, students were taught to evangelize, every student in class was sharing faith, having at least one baptism
- I began producing and publishing materials based on the five questions above
- Over the last 10 years, more and more Latin American mission points have been identified; dozens of new churches started
- My ministry is one of sharing with churches and Christians all across Latin America how to evangelize
- Seminars are providing encouragement, training and motivation
- I now work with a chain of mission churches that are baptizing 2000-3000 each year

I hope you can see three things: first, what I learned about evangelism; second, what I want you to learn about evangelism; third, why I think these lessons are so important!