

6 Steps Out of Your Religious Box

Whenever I visit my friend Lewis Lee, a pastor in Baltimore, I end up on the streets. That's because Lewis is never content to keep his congregation cooped up inside their church. Every month he takes them downtown to feed homeless people at a park near Johns Hopkins University. On hot summer days he takes teams to the worst neighborhoods of his city to pray for people, share the gospel and distribute bottles of water.

This should be standard procedure for any church, but it's not the norm. A majority of American churches rarely engage in any form of outreach that takes place outside their buildings—and 95 percent of Christians in this country have never led a person to Christ. Because of fear, apathy or lack of training, we are content to live in an isolated religious universe. Then we trick ourselves into believing we can transform our communities by singing, praying and preaching to the choir.

Yet when I read the book of Acts, I'm struck by the fact that in the earliest days of the New Testament church, almost all ministry took place outside of Christian meetings. The gospel was always shared outside the box. Of course, the first disciples met together for encouragement, teaching and fellowship, but their primary focus was always outward. Shouldn't the book of Acts be our pattern?

If you want to break out of your religious box, and you want your church to do the same, you must be willing to take these steps:

1. Ask for the Holy Spirit's power. The first outreach in the book of Acts occurred immediately after the disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit. The apostle Peter, who had denied Jesus just weeks before, boldly preached in a public place—and

3,000 people were converted (Acts 2:41). You may feel fearful about sharing your faith, but you will receive supernatural confidence to speak when you are baptized in the Holy Spirit. Lack of emphasis on the Spirit's power is the No. 1 reason the American church is timid when it comes to evangelism.

2. Look for opportunities. Peter and John were on their way to the temple to worship when they saw a lame man who needed healing (Acts 3:1-3). They prayed for him, and the subsequent miracle led to more conversions. Many of us are so focused on getting to church that we miss the people God puts in our path along the way. Your biggest opportunity may be on the street corner *outside* the church. Tune your ear to the cries around you.

3. Expect miracles. In the early church, miracles of healing took place in the streets after they preached (Acts 5:14-16). Maybe one reason we don't see the same level of miracles today is that we want God to perform them on our carpeted stages when He wants to show His power on the city square, on the subway or in the Wal-Mart parking lot. You don't have to be a theologian to share the gospel—just offer to pray for someone and see what happens!

4. Be willing to go to out-of-the-way places. God told the evangelist Philip to leave the exciting revival meetings in Samaria and go to a remote place on a desert road (Acts 8:26). His obedience led to the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch, who then planted the gospel in that nation. Because we think spiritual impact is measured by crowds, we often neglect one-on-one conversations. God's biggest surprises are often found on desert roads, and sometimes the most strategic ministry moments involve just one spiritually desperate individual.

5. Always look for the need. The gospel spread rapidly in the regions of Lydda and Joppa because Peter prayed for a bedridden man named Aeneas and a dead woman named Tabitha (Acts 9:32-42). Neither of these people went to a church to

get ministry. Be sensitive to people in crisis—and go where they are. One miracle can set a whole city abuzz.

6. Be willing to cross cultural barriers. Peter didn't want to go to the house of Cornelius because Jews didn't hang around with Italians. But when he followed the Holy Spirit's leading and walked into that house full of foreigners, the gospel jumped over the cultural firewall and a new subculture was introduced to Jesus (Acts 10:44-45). As you pray about where to do outreach, don't allow racial barriers to limit you. Cross the line.

It's time we dispense with the crazy notion that people should come to us and sit in our padded chairs in order to hear our message. Jesus' mandate was "Go"—not "Wait for them to come to you." Let's trade in our passive, anemic religiosity and reclaim the passionate, aggressive, evangelistic faith that was modeled for us by the early church.

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