

Evangelism Is Back!

While American believers increasingly stress being missional, justice-minded and service-oriented, we've also neglected the basics of communicating the gospel message. But evangelist Rice Brooks believes we're on the brink of a new movement that's making the Great Commission more than just a suggestion.

While talking with students on the campus of East Carolina University last year, I had just finished a conversation with an athlete when a student named Frank approached me and introduced himself with a surprising confession. "I'm probably the biggest drug dealer on this campus," he said bluntly. "But as I walked by you and saw you talking to that guy, something told me you could help me."

I had spent the day with several leaders reaching out on campus and was surprised at how open and willing people were to have a gospel conversation. Frank had walked by several times and overheard some of the dialogue. He prayed and repented for his rebellion against God and put his trust in Christ. One year later he is serving in a campus group and planning to enter campus ministry when he graduates.

More and more, genuine conversions like this are taking place on university campuses in North America. Ron Lewis, who pastors congregations in North Carolina and New York and leads an international campus outreach ministry called Campus Harvest, told me: "It's an unprecedented time of openness to share the gospel—unlike I've seen in the last 20 years."

Lewis shared with me about the dramatic conversion of Joe—an atheist and a doctoral and medical student at a major university in the Northeast—who was merely sitting in class this year when a sense of the reality of God swept over him. He was invited by a friend to attend the New York church Lewis

pastors, Morning Star New York, where he was saved and baptized.

"I believe my journey to faith is one that people from every background and belief system can expect in their own lives, once they scrutinize the gospel with an open mind," Joe says of his experience with coming to Christ.

Testimonies like these are increasing today as Christian ministries seem to be awakening from a long season of evangelistic futility. The reason, Lewis believes, is simple: "The gospel is being presented in a clear, fresh way. When the gospel is preached, people have a chance to believe."

An 'Evangelistic Spring'?

This new movement could be described as the beginning of an "evangelistic spring" in North America. Signs of a fresh boldness in Christian witnessing are popping up everywhere. People from all walks of life are standing up for their faith in Christ.

Time magazine recently listed outspoken Christian pro athletes Tim Tebow and Jeremy Lin among the top 100 most influential people in the world and described physician Francis Collins, head of the Human Genome Project, as "a forthright Christian." This year's Masters Golf Tournament winner, Bubba Watson, told the world at the trophy celebration, "I want to thank my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ."

Make no mistake, though. The snow has not fully melted yet from this long winter of meager evangelistic growth in the West.

While millions have been coming to Christ in Asia, Africa and Latin America, the church in North America has been in the "doldrums," according to LifeWay President Tom Rainer. His associate, Ed Stetzer, who leads LifeWay's research effort, estimates that less than 3 percent of the continent's churches

have been growing through evangelism. The 17 percent that are growing are doing so primarily through the migration of believers from church to church.

Others are turning to atheism. The Easter cover story of *Newsweek* carried the title "Forget Church—Follow Jesus." The article claimed that "the fastest-growing segment of belief among the young was atheism." Appropriately, atheism was called a "belief"—in the absence of the gospel of Jesus Christ being delivered, other messages fill the vacuum.

On the positive side of this, however, a major reason that the tide of evangelism is rising in North America is the dramatic emergence of a new wave of apologists/evangelists such as philosopher William Lane Craig, mathematics professor John Lennox, astronomer Hugh Ross, cultural commentator Larry Taunton and New Testament scholar Dan Wallace.

These "new evangelists" are challenging atheists on scientific and philosophical grounds and helping to remove the thick clouds of skepticism that have settled over the U.S. and Canada in the last 25 years. Most of these Christian intellectuals present the case for Christ as well as the evidence for the existence of God.

The Search for Answers

As encouraging as these signs of hope are, there is much to be done to completely turn the tide and reverse the impact of the crippling skepticism that has plagued the church in the West. In researching the state of the North American church during my doctoral studies at Fuller Theological Seminary, I uncovered other more subtle reasons that evangelism has ground to a virtual halt in North America.

1. Christians aren't sure what the gospel is and whether they should share it. Someone asked me, "Doesn't the Bible say to preach the gospel and, if necessary, use words?" Those words are not from the apostle Paul or any other biblical writer,

but from St. Francis of Assisi.

If the original apostles would have stopped preaching and simply done acts of kindness and served the poor, they undoubtedly would have lived longer. But they boldly proclaimed Jesus in the face of opposition and persecution. When physically threatened, they retorted, "We cannot stop speaking about what we've seen and heard" (Acts 4:20, NASB).

"Servant evangelism" pioneer and pastor Steve Sjogren agrees that evangelism is not just acts of charity and kindness devoid of a stated message. "If we help the poor and serve our communities and omit the bread of life [the gospel], we have failed to live up to our Lord's command," he says.

2. Christians lack clarity about the content of the gospel. The failure to give a clear presentation of Jesus' message leaves many people on the doorstep of salvation. They have no real understanding of what God did for them in the life, death and resurrection of His Son, and what their response should be to Him.

Many Christians are being activated to share their faith using this definition of the gospel: "The gospel is the good news that God became man in Jesus Christ. He lived the life we should have lived and died the death we should have died—in our place. Three days later He rose from the dead, proving He is the Son of God and offering the gift of salvation to everyone who repents and believes the gospel."

Dale Evrist, pastor of New Song Christian Fellowship in Nashville, Tenn., points out: "By simply training our people to memorize and articulate the gospel, we are seeing a dramatic increase in the number of gospel presentations each week. It's simple math: The more the gospel is presented, the more people get saved."

We no longer can be content just to bring people to church where the pastor will preach the gospel. We must see the

millions of believers in North America equipped and empowered to do it.

Return of the Evangelist

From my research at Fuller I also discovered that there's a need for evangelists to function in local churches. Most of us wouldn't think of having a church without a pastor, would we? But what about a church without an evangelist?

"Without the evangelist, there is no missional church," says Eddie Gibbs, former head of the School of World Missions at Fuller.

Charles Spurgeon, the legendary 19th-century pastor from England, employed more than 100 evangelists in London who dedicated themselves to the city. Within 25 years (from 1867 to 1892), Spurgeon planted more than 200 churches in London, while pastoring a megachurch in the same city, by strategically partnering the evangelist and the pastor.

Similar results on a smaller scale are being seen as churches plant multiple congregations around their cities, rather than being content with operating at one location.

In Murfreesboro, Tenn., through the ministry partnership of evangelist Brock Lillis and pastor Delvin Pikes, Bethel Murfreesboro (part of a multisite church with seven locations) has grown from 50 to 200 people in one year through preaching the gospel.

"We show up on the campus of Middle Tennessee State University on a daily basis and share Christ," Lillis explains. "The more we preach the gospel, the more people get saved."

Peter Dusan, who leads a campus-based church at Texas State University, averages more than 100 gospel presentations a week. "Our congregation has grown from a small group to over 150 through evangelism," Dusan says.

His primary spiritual gift is that of an evangelist, and he works tirelessly to equip his congregation, as well as other congregations that reach out to the campus. During Easter week this year, they banded together with several ministries and presented the gospel individually to more than 1,000 students.

In Red Deer, Alberta, pastor Jachin Mullen of Word of Life Church saw his congregation grow from 500 to almost 1,000 last year by combining service to the community with preaching the gospel. At the University Church in Calgary, pastor Brant Redding is seeing “more conversions due to regular believers being equipped by evangelists to share the gospel,” he says.

Start the Conversation

Every Nation, the international ministry I helped found, uses a method for presenting the gospel called “SALT”: **S**tart the conversation, **A**sk questions, **L**isten, **T**ell the Story. Along with it, we use a simple tool called “The God Test.” It is helping people start these conversations on campuses, in cafes and around kitchen tables all over the world.

The God Test poses the question: “Do you believe in God?” We then ask a list of 10 questions if the answer is yes and 10 if the answer is no. We’re seeing the power of asking questions and sincerely listening first instead of thinking we have to be the ones who do all the talking first.

And if you listen first, something remarkable happens: People actually return the favor and listen to you tell “the Story”—which of course is the gospel of Jesus Christ. But it is also *your* story, because the gospel happened to *you*.

I used the SALT method when talking with a man in New Orleans not long ago when my friend Troy and I were taking my three boys to a basketball game.

We passed the table of a psychic promising to “read your palm and predict your future.” Feeling a tug on my heart from the

Lord, I asked Troy to wait for a moment with my sons while I talked to this palm reader.

I introduced myself, sat down at his table and identified myself as a minister, and got his permission to ask him some questions. "Why did you become a palm reader?" I asked first.

His answer took me back.

"I was a Christian and spent a lot of time at a revival in Florida searching for the power of God. When I couldn't seem to find it, I started dabbling in the occult and even Voodoo," he answered, then added: "All that scared me, and I decided to study palm reading because it seemed safer."

I continued asking him questions and genuinely listening to his answers. I purposely refrained from challenging him too quickly or preaching until I felt I had listened to him first. After about 20 minutes he said, "Now, tell me why do you do what you do" (referring to my being a minister).

"I preach the gospel for two primary reasons," I answered.

"First, the gospel is the only thing on this planet that can tell a person what is really wrong with them. You see, the gospel tells us that the source of *our* pain is our separation from God because of sin. As we have broken God's moral laws it has resulted in our lives and our souls becoming broken."

He was genuinely listening. Like a doctor delivering tough news, I did my best to be kind and gentle yet not compromise (in the name of some twisted version of being "loving" to him) by not telling him what his real condition was.

"The second reason I preach the gospel," I continued, "is because it's the only thing on this planet that can tell us what to do to heal our condition." I then stated the gospel clearly and offered him God's answer for his life. He thanked me and actually allowed me to pray for him.

Although countless stories like this result in dramatic salvations, I encourage you that they don't have to end that way for them to be effective. A seed of the gospel was sown that may bear fruit one day.

But the seed wasn't planted because I devoted a great deal of time to developing a relationship with him. Evangelism is not just about building relationships. We must not limit evangelism only to those we have a relationship with or avoid mentioning the gospel for fear it will alienate unbelievers.

I firmly believe building relationships is important—it often takes hearing the gospel a number of times to be saved. I also believe there is wisdom in knowing when we should speak to people about Christ and how we can maximize the impact of our witness.

Someone recently told me, “We must earn the right to be heard.” As much as I tried to understand what he really meant, I couldn't help but think that according to the Scripture, Jesus earned that right for me. We preach in the authority He earned through His life and death.

People's eternal souls are at stake—in our Western culture as much as anywhere else. We should have a sense of urgency in our efforts to reach them with the gospel. It's the only hope they have of being saved. Remember, *you don't have to know a drowning person's name to save his life.*

Rice Brooks is co-founder of Every Nation, a network of more than 1,000 churches in 60-plus nations. He provides oversight for Bethel World Outreach in Nashville, Tenn., and has a doctorate in Missiology from Fuller Theological Seminary.

To see Rice Brooks' 3-minute training on evangelism·click

here.