

Evangelism

Sharing the Gospel in Community

Lucy Witten

When a missionary arrives on the field, the task can seem overwhelming. He lands in a city filled with lost souls. His job is to proclaim the gospel to the multitude, but his evangelism efforts alone seem small in comparison to the size of the task. What can the missionary do? How can his effort make a dent in the vast lostness around him? In this article, I will demonstrate the value of missionaries partnering with the local church or a near-culture church on the field to evangelize non-believers.

Biblical Foundations

Jesus speaks of the church working together to proclaim the good news of his kingdom. Jesus describes his followers as “a city on a hill that cannot be hidden” (Matt. 5:13). He tells them to “let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Matt 5:16). A city is not one person alone. By their very nature, cities are made of many individuals near one another. The gospel is on display as unbelievers see the community of Christians together. Willis and Coe explain:

People need to see the grace of God lived out among a group of people. They need to see other believers repenting, confessing,

rejoicing in God's grace, and forgiving others. They need to see the gospel applied to life... You are not meant simply to show off the light you have as an individual, but rather you are meant to display the light of the gospel through a community of people who are unified in Jesus.¹

The good news of Jesus Christ in the gospel is lived out before an unbelieving world in the church.

Jesus describes two specific characteristics of the community of believers who point others to his salvation, love and unity. Jesus says, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:34–35). God's saving love for mankind is demonstrated when church members love one another. Dever writes, "One of the main reasons that the local church is to be a community of love is so that others will know the God of love... The life of the local congregation makes the audible gospel visible."² The gospel message of God's love is on display when the church is characterized by love.

Before his death on the cross, Jesus prayed:

I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they may also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me. (John 17:20–23)

¹ Dustin Willis and Aaron Coe, *Life on Mission: Joining the Everyday Mission of God* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2014), 133.

² Mark Dever, *The Gospel & Personal Evangelism* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2007), 51.

Jesus believed the church's unity would communicate that God loves people. The church has a role to play in God's work of redemption: the evangelization of all people and nations.

The New Testament provides examples of the church functioning as an evangelistic community. First, Jesus sets the pattern of partnership in gospel proclamation when he sends his first disciples out two by two to proclaim the arrival of the kingdom of God and preach repentance (Luke 10:1-9, Mark 6:7-13). In Acts, new believers were added to the early church daily as they followed the apostles' teaching together (Act 2:42-47). Peter and Paul traveled with other believers as they shared the gospel message (Acts 10:23,13:13-52). The gospel spread through the work of the entire church in regions where there was no apostolic presence (Acts 9:31, 11:19-26). Paul commended the church in Thessalonica because they were known as a community that spread the gospel far and wide (1 Thess. 1:8). Plummer conveys, "The apostolic mission devolves upon each church as a whole- not upon any particular member or group. Each individual within the church, then, will manifest missionary activity according to his or her particular gifting and life situation."³ Church members were involved in evangelism together in the New Testament as the gospel spread across peoples and nations.

Christians from Western cultures can be characterized by a lone ranger mentality.⁴ Individualistic thinking must not pervade missionary evangelism. Chan and Beuving assert, "While every *individual* needs to obey Jesus' call to follow, we cannot follow Jesus as *individuals*. The proper context for every disciple maker is the church. It is impossible to make disciples apart

³ Robert L. Plummer, *Paul's Understanding of the Church's Mission: Did the Apostle Paul Expect the Early Christian Communities to Evangelize?* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster Biblical Monographs, 2006), 144.

⁴ Willis and Coe, *Life on Mission*, 88.

from the church of Jesus Christ.”⁵ (emphasis theirs) The task of evangelism is rightly accomplished with both personal and corporate evangelism. Evangelism must connect to the local church. Missionaries need to evangelize in partnership with new and established churches in their context. Helping the local church to flourish as an evangelistic community enlarges the reach of the missionary.

Practical Applications

Churches are evangelistic communities when evangelism is a normal activity for them. Dever characterizes this culture as “an expectation that Christians will share the gospel with others, talk about doing that, pray about it, and regularly plan and work together to help each other evangelize.”⁶ In fact, the missionary does not need to bring foreign ideas or programs into a church body to help cultivate this integration of evangelism into church life. Stiles explains, “We don’t remake the church for evangelism. Instead, Jesus did not forget the gospel when he built the church.”⁷

For example, baptism and the Lord’s Supper are physical pictures of the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ. The preaching of the Word proclaims the gospel of Jesus Christ. When missionaries regularly participate in the life of the church, opportunities abound to encourage a church to adopt an evangelistic culture.

Chelsea serves as a missionary to an unreached people group in Southeast Asia.⁸ She also attends a local church consisting of other people groups in her city. When her small group asked for prayer requests, she requested

⁵ Francis Chan and Mark Beuving, *Multiply: Disciples Making Disciples* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C Cook, 2012), 51.

⁶ Dever, *The Gospel and Personal Evangelism*, 17.

⁷ J.M. Stiles, *Evangelism: How the Whole Church Speaks of Jesus* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), 64.

⁸ All missionary and local church member names have been changed for security purposes.

prayer for a friend from a particular unreached people group with whom she had been sharing the gospel. The church members were shocked. They advised her those people were hostile to the gospel and would never come to faith. She must not risk her safety to share the gospel with them. However, as they took her request to the Lord week after week, the Lord began to change their hearts for evangelism. God convicted them that sharing the gospel with unlikely converts was a task for them as well as Chelsea.⁹

Another missionary, Anthony, helped his church plan their sermons through the book of Acts for almost a year. As the church elders preached the story of the early church from God's Word, the congregation saw their role in sharing the gospel. Instead of Anthony trying to convince believers they needed to share the gospel, they began to ask him for advice in situations where they were able to evangelize. The Word of God convinced them of their need to proclaim God's salvation.¹⁰

The evangelistic community of the local church emboldens all the followers of Christ in the church to share the gospel. If missionaries contact churches and do a training on evangelism methods, a few gifted individuals may begin to share the gospel on their own. If, however, the missionary and the church together model evangelism and invite new believers to participate alongside them, they are more likely to inject evangelism into part of the regular lifestyle of the members.

Jamie came to Christ after attending church meetings for over a year. Through gospel-centered prayers, music, preaching, discussion groups, and chats over lunch, almost every church member had shared the gospel with her. When the church mentioned an Easter outreach to children, Jamie, a new believer, was eager to participate. Shy by nature and nervous around kids, she supported this evangelistic effort through her skills as a baker. She attended the event and brought beautifully decorated baked goods for each

⁹ Personal conversation with Chelsea.

¹⁰ Personal conversation with Anthony.

family. During the meeting, a fellow church member shared the gospel story in a simple way for the children.

Jamie watched evangelism in action. These initial steps to participate in the evangelistic event led to greater boldness in her life. Jamie now has conversations with her own friends about the gospel. She also creates opportunities for these friends to hear the gospel as she invites them to connect with other church members over coffee.¹¹

Missionaries Matthew and Kandy invited a group of young professionals from their local church to their home for Bible study and prayer. During this time of discipleship, they spoke often of sharing the gospel and encouraging one another in their efforts. Some of these believers readily shared the gospel, while others began to take baby steps. When Matthew and Kandy threw an evangelistic Christmas open house, they invited these young professionals to come alongside them serving food and initiating gospel conversations. Matthew and Kandy would be unable to share the gospel with everyone at the party. Young professionals still living in their parents' homes would not have the ability to host such a large scale gathering on their own. Working together this church family and the missionary couple could have a greater impact on the lost.

Indeed, both the missionary and the church need to recognize the value of their partnership. A missionary, for example, must work to make the gospel understandable to someone in a culture different from his or her own. The local church body intuitively navigates the culture that is foreign to the missionary. The church can help the missionary understand the worldview of the people around them. The people's understanding of reality, human nature, death, and purpose makes a difference in how to best convey the gospel to them. The church will have insights into which biblical metaphors

¹¹ The author personally witnessed these events.

of salvation resonate within the culture based on their own conversions to Christianity.¹²

Missionaries can also assist the church in their evangelism efforts. Missionaries often have a comfort level in sharing the gospel that many new believers do not possess. Missionaries can ask questions as outsiders that would be offensive coming from a local person. For example, in the author's context, questions from a foreigner about why a religious practice is followed are seen as an interest in the people themselves and happily answered. If a local asked the same question, it is perceived as judgmental. A missionary's unbelieving friends may think of the gospel as good for only a foreigner, but their perspective often changes when they meet the local church community that includes believers of their own people group or nation. Seeing how the gospel saved someone from their same culture and religious background can have a great impact on the lost.

In places of high persecution, the missionary can serve as an extension of the church's own evangelism and discipleship efforts. Nik Ripken describes the way persecuted believers often want to partner with Western missionaries. He writes:

We know our own people. We can choose the best fishing pole and the right weight of the line, and we know what size hooks to use. 'As we fish here in our own culture, can we use you as fishing bait? . . . People in our culture do not know whom they can trust when they have dreams and visions; they don't know who to talk with when God has touched their hearts. They see you as safe people. . . You can have hundreds of spiritual conversations while a local person could possibly have a dozen. So are you willing

¹² Ideas for this paragraph are a summarization of topics from Sam Chan, *Evangelism in a Skeptical World: How to Make the Unbelievable News about Jesus More Believable* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2018).

to be bait for Jesus and allow us to gather in a harvest of local souls?’¹³

This partnership humbles the missionary but allows for broad sowing of gospel seed.

Conclusion

Almost 7.9 billion people live in the world today.¹⁴ Each individual needs to hear the message of the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ. God has called missionaries to the ends of the earth, filling them with a passion to share the gospel where it is not well-known. As God builds his church in new places, wise missionaries can heed the advice of Mack Stiles: “To be compelled by love to share the gospel individually is a beautiful thing, but when it happens in community it’s joyfully glorious.”¹⁵ May missionaries go forth in partnership with the evangelistic community of the local church.

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¹³ Nik Ripken & Barry Stricker, *The Insanity of Obedience: Walking with Jesus in Tough Places* (Nashville, TN: B & H Publishing Group, 2014), 259.

¹⁴ *World population Dashboard: United Nations Population Fund*. World Population Dashboard | United Nations Population Fund. (n.d.). Retrieved September 10, 2021, from <https://www.unfpa.org/data/world-population-dashboard>.

¹⁵ Stiles, *Evangelism*, 48.