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## A Response to Dr. Rainer: What Is The Key To Effective Evangelism?

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**A Response to Dr. Rainer  
What Is The Key To Effective Evangelism?**

**Charles Arn**

“The mysterious missing element in church growth today is evangelism.” Dr. Rainer is correct in this assessment. He is also correct in the assertion that without practicing, what McGavran called “effective evangelism,” a church is not fully participating in Christ’s great commission to make disciples. In fact, without practicing effective evangelism, a church is *not* participating in the great commission – at all!

It is my conviction, as I would expect it to be of most church growth disciples, that *the* most important priority for the church and its leaders is the matter of effective evangelism. In the film “How to Grow A Church” (the first film ever produced on American Church Growth), Dr. Win Arn asked Donald McGavran about the mission of the church. McGavran responded, “There are many good things the church can do. But there is only one thing the church absolutely must do; that is to reach the lost with the good news of the Gospel.” Churches today that subscribe to that priority of effective evangelism are closest to the teachings of McGavran, and, I believe, closest to the heart and mission of Christ.

But church leaders today also face a dilemma concerning effective evangelism. Many pastors know the clear command to “... go and make disciples,” and genuinely desire to do so. Yet, they also know that the evangelism methods in which they train their members are often ineffective in reaching secular people; in fact, many evangelism methods repel Christians and non-Christians alike. As a result, the very word “evangelism” often causes anxi-

ety and fear among church members.

National statistics confirm our suspicions that the Church today is losing the struggle for the hearts and minds of America:

- During the last ten years combined communicant membership of all Protestant denominations has declined by 9.5% (4,498,242), while the national population has increased by 11.4% (24,153,000).
- No county in America has a greater percentage of churched persons today than a decade ago.
- Half of all churches last year did not add one new member through "conversion growth."
- The churches to population ratio is also declining. In 1900 there were 27 churches for every 10,000 Americans. In 1950 there were 17 churches for every 10,000 Americans. Today there are fewer than 11 churches for every 10,000 Americans.
- Add to this the estimate that churches lose 2,765,000 people to nominalism and secularism each year, and between 3,500 and 4,000 churches close their doors each year for the last time; while only 1,100 - 1,500 churches are started.

These statistics force us to confront the fact that our present-day evangelistic efforts are largely ineffective. Looking into the future, it seems apparent that our present evangelism strategies offer little hope of significantly impacting our culture and winning large numbers to Christ and the Church.

It's not that we, as Christians, aren't willing or even trying. Each year we beam 2 million television and radio programs to the spiritually hungry masses. Yet the hungry, for the most part, turn the dial and move on.

We tell ourselves that "people are hungry for the Gospel" and we plan city-wide crusades. We develop evangelistic training programs. We conduct "seeker services." We employ the media to penetrate the airwaves.

But in the midst of our present variety of evangelistic methods and activities, we would do well to stop and ask a more basic question; namely, could the *approach* be wrong?

*The Dynamic Equivalent*

In search of a way to effectively communicate the Good News to those in our culture today, we can find what I believe is a key insight from the foreign mission field to which Donald McGavran gave so much of his life. The insight is called “dynamic equivalence.”

Foreign missionaries and Bible translators recognize that communicating the Gospel into a different culture and language always requires interpretation, since almost no words in one language have their identical equivalent in another language. Hence, the art of translating involves finding words and concepts that are “dynamically equivalent” in the new culture, so that the essence of the message is carefully preserved and meaningfully expressed.

I recently re-read a letter from Dr. Arthur Glasser, former dean of the School of World Mission at Fuller Seminary. He noted that:

We must not believe mere recitation of biblical texts constitutes effective communication—which is a necessary prerequisite to effective evangelism. Rather, we must enter into the thought patterns and vocabularies of the people with whom we wish to share the Good News.

The concept of “dynamic equivalence” can be enlarged to identify any communication bridge from one culture to another. Indeed, without a deliberate adherence to this strategy, the Good News will not effectively cross any culture barrier, on the mission field or here at home. To assume that the term “culture” applies only to ethnic or language barriers is to miss a critical issue in the strategy toward effective evangelism. In reality, a “culture barrier” exists even between two nearly identical people if one is a member of the Christian faith community, and the other is outside that culture.

Therefore, it is necessary in effective evangelism, to stop and ask: “Are we really communicating? Are we using the best communication bridges to cross over these culture barriers? And, are we getting results?”

Jesus, as a master communicator, was always looking for “bridges,” for “points of contact,” for “symbols” of the commonality of people’s hurts, concerns, and yearnings. He showed us what communicating the Gospel through “dynamic equivalence”

was all about.

Increasingly, social scientists and anthropologists are contending that the predominant concern of our culture in the late 20th century ... is human relationships ... and a sense of belonging ...and love.

Turn through the radio dial and the theme of love is reiterated again and again. Love songs in one form or another, comprise the vast majority of what the young and the old hear. Television shows and commercials mirror the value placed on supportive friendships and relationships in all combinations.

And observe the increasingly documented decay of people and society when relationships, when a supportive community, when love is absent.

Relationships are also a major reason people affiliate with churches in our culture. In our own studies we have confirmed what McGavran originally called "the bridges of God." Namely, that 75% - 90% of all people come into Christian faith and active church involvement as a result of a relationship with a trusted friend, neighbor, or relative.

An important insight, I believe, begins to emerge. Could it be that *relationships* are a key contact point with the people in our culture? Could it be that *love* is the dynamic equivalent in America today, and the reference point upon which we can build an effective evangelism strategy? Obviously the image of love pursued in our culture is distorted and imperfect. Yet the *need* for love is part of every human being, and can only find its complete fulfillment in God's perfect love. If the Gospel—God's love—could be effectively *demonstrated* then the "telling" would have far greater impact. Stan Mooneyham once observed that "love spoken can be easily turned aside. Love demonstrated is irresistible."

In searching for the connecting bridges—the dynamic equivalents—for America today, we must study our culture. What are Americans listening to on the radio, watching on television, reading about, talking about ... that can give us a clue to the hurts, the concerns, the yearnings of people today?

I am propelled toward the conclusion that *love* holds the key for effectively evangelizing America! In fact, I would submit the following hypothesis: "Evangelizing America—and ultimately the world—will be effective in direct relationship to the church's ability to evidence Christ's love."

*Toward A Restatement Of Purpose*

In closing, I would like to suggest four foundational propositions which I believe are not only consistent with McGavran's vision for churches to be practicing effective evangelism, but provide the steps by which that vision can be realized.

1. *The church should make loving its first priority.* Nothing is more important to the purpose of a local church than to follow its Master's command to love. No command is given more often in the New Testament than to love. Love each other. Love the new member. Love the visitor. Love the unchurched person. Love the neighbor in need. When love is a priority for the local church it then becomes an "open channel" through which God can express His love to others outside the church.

2. *The church should be a community of love.* The local church should be the best place to find authentic love in abundance. Regrettably, there are some fraternal organizations, service clubs, even neighborhood bars where more love is found than in some churches. However, a church which claims to be Christ's body on earth *must be a community of love.* A place where love is freely given, demonstrated, unconditional, and available ... to all who need it, particularly those yet to experience His love.

3. *A church will become more loving only when its members become more loving.* The local church, as the body of Christ, is comprised of individual members. When these members learn to channel Christ's love to those around them, then that entire church body will channel Christ's love. As I have researched the inter-relationship between loving churches and growing churches, I have found that love can, indeed, be taught, and love *can* be learned. Paul exhorts Christians in I Corinthians 14:1 to "Let love be your aim." It *is* possible. But churches become more loving only when their members become more loving.

4. *Love is the means of fulfilling the Great Commission.* The overarching priorities of the church of Jesus Christ are "the great commission," and the "great commandment." The great commandment is capsulized in Mark 12:30 - 31: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. The second is this: Love your neighbor as yourself. There is no commandment," says Christ, "greater than these."

The great commission is summarized in Matthew 28:19 - 20. "Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them

in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teach them to obey everything I have commanded you ...”

The great commission—to make disciples—and the great commandment—to love—are inseparably linked. The *mission* Christ gave us is to make disciples. The *model* He gave us is love ... the *method* is love ... the *motive* is love ... the *message* is love.

Writer

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