

THE CASE TO REDRESS EVANGELISM IN NORTH AMERICA

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— Editor’s Note: This article is written as an “opinion piece” and is offered to stimulate a provocative discussion on how evangelism is viewed in our changing context. Responses to this article are encouraged and may be included in our next issues to help our readers explore the questions and challenges raised. Send your responses to Alan McMahan at alan.mcmahan@biola.edu.

Abstract

This article is a response to a warning made by George Hunter regarding the church’s adherence to its own “folk wisdom.” It explores the question of how the church could change, particularly in how it currently views evangelism, and how church leaders and members are unprepared to face the mission complexity unique to our time. It offers an alternative perspective with methodology that is theologically formed on the pattern of Christ, and built around the notion of spiritual influence. To that end, the kind of research that is most needed is discussed along with ideas on examining existing presuppositions.

Having attended last year’s Great Commission Research Network conference, I wish to add my thoughts on a noted caveat made by presenter George Hunter. My relevancy radar began beeping upon hearing his call for continuing research to be done in the area of evangelism and especially over what he termed “folk wisdom.” In this article, I delve into how this charge relates to gospel receptivity, a foundational tenet of church growth.

I realize I am not a familiar name or voice for the journal. I will be upfront with you in saying my ideas are not always popular in every leadership circle. Nevertheless, education perspective lurches forward by different, sometimes striking, points of view. Even if you disagree with my conceptual thoughts herein, I hope what I have written sharpens you in some way. Much of my story, the study of church growth and evangelism under Dr. Gary McIntosh's program, was supplemented from practitioner experiences and observation of others as a pastor, interviewer, outreach director of a large church, church planting coach, international mission trainer, and development consultant. You should know by way of introduction that I am the author of a book on evangelism with the strange title—*Soul Whisperer: Why the Church Must Change the Way It Views Evangelism*. I will be sharing the inspiration behind the treatise ahead.

Let me begin with safer, more secure footing, the sage words of an esteemed mentor. Hunter warned of a systemic problem, when our thinking and methods become locked tight in a closed box, stating, "Our inherited denominational folk wisdom can be so entrenched that very few church leaders are likely to accept a *much better idea* the first time they are exposed to it."¹ Not only are his words about our proclivity toward intransigence pertinent for today, but also, I predict, they will prove increasingly prophetic over time. Perhaps I see the issue as more prevalent than most. However, it is my conviction that the penchant against revision looms as the great barrier to the church's mission and future. Let me quantify why I say this.

Taking a snapshot of our rapidly shifting context, we have what I call the "1-in-5 rule" in play. According to the now-famous American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS)² and Barna's follow up, 1-in-5 Americans identify as non-religious (the "nones"). Thom Rainer blogged on this cultural trajectory: "Every year another two million American adults become less receptive to the gospel, and less receptive to churches."³ In addition, only 1-in-5 Millennials believe attending a church is important.⁴ Almost any way you slice it, research tells us we are losing ground with the next generation. Add in the global picture, 1-in-5 people on the planet are presently Muslim. You may already know that Pew has predicted Islam will surpass Christianity

¹ George Hunter, "One More Time: Why We Do Serious Research on the Ministry of Evangelism" (presentation, Great Commission Research Network Conference, October 2016).

² American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS 2008), principal investigators Barry A. Kosmin and Ariela Keysar, Trinity College, Hartford, CT.

³ Thom Rainer, "Five Reasons Growth May Be More Difficult in Your Church," March 13, 2017.

⁴ Sam Eaton, "59 Percent of Millennial Raised in a Church Have Dropped Out—And They're Trying to Tell Us Why," *Faith It*, February 19, 2017.

as the world's largest religion somewhere after 2050,⁵ mostly due to higher birth rates, but evangelistic anemia in regions is a contributing factor, for sure.

Do these 1-in-5 categories signal anything particularly significant? I believe they do. They represent groupings outside “the joining circle” of the attractional church. In the words of James White from *The Rise of the Nones*, “They are not seekers.”⁶ In a recent presentation on mobilization, Kevin Peck said their own Austin survey tallied, “71 percent of his community would not attend a church if they were invited.”⁷ It was not that long ago when the word from church leaders was that the unchurched were merely waiting to be asked by a friend. Involved with CRU (Campus Crusade) on his college campus in California, my son invited five outer friends to a ministry event and got five no’s in reply. However, were they willing to have spiritual conversations with him? Absolutely!

The culture’s rising ranks of unchurched are still reachable, just not the way we are geared or well equipped to do it. The challenge of what is occurring outside the church with its increasing complexity is compounded by what is happening on the inside. It is why Hunter’s words are so relevant. Though we are reaching some in the mission stations across North America, the standardized attractional approach (reaching people via the service) and the focus on renewal (spiritual feeding will foster seeding) are not achieving the missional prowess in members now vital for our time.⁸ As I write in my new book called *ReMission*, “Attraction is limited; renewal is a lie.” In that work (in process at Whitaker House), I analyze our current scene helping church leaders rethink the mission empowerment equation. In short, we have vast numbers sitting under sound, biblical teaching for what can be years ad infinitum that remain virtually clueless on how to engage in mission-effectual ways. In my training with literally thousands of members, looking into the eyes and listening to their voices, the gap is glaring.

From the faces to facts, the training need for members looms large. Ryan Kozey’s Christ Together study (60,000 sampled) revealed 73 percent of Christians had no effectual sharing relationships with non-Christians.⁹ The

⁵ Bill Chappell, “World’s Muslim Population Will Surpass Christians This Century, Pew Says,” *NPR*. April 2, 2015. <http://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2015/04/02/397042004/muslim-population-will-surpass-christians-this-century-pew-says>.

⁶ James Emery White, *The Rise of the Nones* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2014), 26–27.

⁷ Kevin Peck, “Mobilizing Through Missional Communities” (presentation, Send Conference, February 19–20, 2017).

⁸ Howard A. Snyder, *The Problem with the Wineskins: Church Structure in a Technological Age* (Dovers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1975), 17.

⁹ Ryan Kozey, “Your Church on Mission: What’s It Going to Take?” (presentation, Southwest Church Planting Forum, October 29, 2014).

reality we have to face is *Christians know the gospel but reach few with it*.¹⁰ Those juxtaposed truths suggest another kind of knowledge is missing—what I am referring to is practical “know how”—the kind of savvy that is not assimilated by merely hearing a sermon or being in a small group Bible study.

Ask the average churchgoer to rate his mission quotient (MQ)—what he has acquired under the teaching ministry of his pastor—and you will get, “Mission quotient, what’s that?” As the anti-human trafficking leader told me disparagingly, “You mentioned skills; I have no skills.” Further, as the elderly woman complained, “They tell us all the time from the stage to go share the gospel, but they never tell us how.” So many not knowing what to do have disengaged and gone mute—mission is something for others, not them. When Christ Together asked the number of unsaved people Christians were reaching towards, the most common response given, what we call the mode, was zero, according to Kozey.¹¹

Though for decades, researchers have lamented the evangelistic vacuum that the answer has not been found in the diagnosis. The reason I see Hunter’s words as apropos is the church continues to try to solve our mutual problem in the same way. From antidotal views in my region, pastors and their teams can be all consumed with flyers, marketing, events, and invites, trying to get more people to come to their church with less and less results. Though I understand their growth dream, I also see in it a great imbalance that is suctioning them away from an even greater vision. If you can allow me to illustrate graphically, it is like a rodent caught in a baited revolving door experiment; the pursuit becomes an addictive endless trap. I witnessed a prominent denomination converge after receiving news of a sizeable drop in membership and baptisms. To their credit, they recognized large percentages of members were disengaged from evangelistic mission. Yet, what did they do in response? They introduced a “new” gospel presentation device (the likes of *The Four Spiritual Laws*). Certainly, it was a well-intentioned redo by a godly group. I am sure there are stories to be talked up, but in the face of alarming decline, all they did was revamp an old approach that has proved not appealing to most church members and no longer conducive for reaching an increasingly authenticity-based, pluralistic, and more distant culture.

From consultations, most pastors and church leaders are aware of their members’ mission incompetencies and would love to see their people more missionally engaged, but they struggle with how to execute. How can they get their flabby, spectating body reaching others? I believe there is a way to course correct. However, you will not get new results from doing the same

¹⁰ Gary Comer, *Soul Whisperer: Why the Church Must Change the Way It Views Evangelism* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2013), 5.

¹¹ Kozey, “Your Church on Mission.”

things. Hunter's intuition is right. We need better ideas. The church must change.

As an introduction summary, we have the 1-in 5s hitting on all cylinders, and the church is stuck in "folk wisdom" mud, especially when it comes to equipping, enlisting, and infusing members for outer influence. We need new training, vehicles, and structures that move high percentages of every church, group, or agency into viable evangelistic disciple making. In North America (and other regions as well), we need to make a fundamental pivot.

THE NEED TO REDRESS EVANGELISM

First seeing the systemic problem while in my doctorate study, I thought, *Maybe we need to scrap it, our mode of thinking, for an entirely different approach.* Inspired by the writings and shoulders of others (Michael Green, George Hunter, and Hugh Halter), I led out from the peloton, hoping others would bite and follow. I attempted to help Christians see how they could approach evangelism in much deeper, more effective, and dynamic ways with every single person they met.

The first issue in dealing with the subject matter of evangelism is that you cannot even get to the subject because of what people already think about it. Ironically, what undermined the popularity of the Church Growth movement parallels the decades-long demise of evangelism—it is partly a perception problem. Despite the fact that McGavran integrated theology with theory and practice,¹² Christopher DiVietro chronicled the Church Growth movement's rise and fall from popularity noting that some leaders, such as Rick Warren, jumped ship when they perceived the Church Growth movement as too theoretical:

I stopped using the phrase around 1986 because of the things I didn't like about the church growth movement . . . I don't like the incessant comparing of churches . . . Another thing I didn't like was the movement's tendency to be more analytical than prescriptive. Pastors did not write many of the church growth books; theorists wrote them.¹³

I recall facing perception resistance as an outreach director of a mega church; hearing how missional-minded members had outright rejected evangelism broke me. They saw the "telling" agenda as insensitive, unloving, and uncompassionate, nothing close to Christ—not caring at all about people's life

¹² Christopher DiVietro, "Understanding Diversification in the Church Growth Movement," *Great Commission Research Journal* (2017): 61.

¹³ Rick Warren, "Comprehensive Health Plan: To Lead a Healthy Church Takes More Than Technique," *Leadership* 18 (1997): 22–29, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/le/1997/summer/713022.html>.

conditions or the world at large in which we live (and they were stereotypically right in some cases!).¹⁴ The same glut feeling occurs when one's missionality is reduced to a church's corporatized brand, where you are asked to merely fill a serving slot, and finger-to-the-wind market principles guide the Spirit enterprise. Christians get the sick sense that something precious got lost. Josh Packard's research on those leaving churches counter-intuited, "The dechurched are leaving to do more, not less. The church isn't asking too much of people; it's asking the wrong things of them."¹⁵ I have seen it. Cog. Machinery. Uncompassionate. Impersonal. Numbers. Brand. I'm outta here!

Another perception noted by DiVietro deplaning the Church Growth movement that matches evangelism's relegation is Hesselgrave's 1988 analysis in which he claims within the methodological emphasis there was "an absence of theological foundations" in evangelical mission periodicals.¹⁶ Rainer concurred with his sharp assessment, "Methodology, once subservient to and a tool of theology, would now appear to be an end instead of a means."¹⁷

Taking heart with these criticisms, if we are to redress evangelism, we need to build it from a theological base. Our paradigm must possess enough depth and range of rooting theology to rectify the following two fronts in which we are losing the battle: (1) folk wisdom hindering perceptions, and (2) folk wisdom hindering efficacy. Both are derailing us. It explains in philosophical terms why I reframed evangelism in the way I did titling my treatise, *Soul Whisperer*, after the pattern of Christ. The new paradigm espousing Jesus' deft manners and methods was an attempt to re-enlist those who had abandoned evangelism (the missional camp), and one that would retool those stuck in antiquated thinking (the surface-y telling camp). On the practical end, we desperately needed something that was more natural and dynamic for Christians, to inspire effectual gospel movement from the sender to the receiver.

Nevertheless, behind the methodology, the body must first see that evangelism is not ancillary to their Christian discipleship, but rather central to their prime calling as participants of the *missio Dei*, followers of Christ who was, after all, the most compassionate, mission-minded person to ever grace this planet. What is failing between the pulpit's passion and the pew's practice is, in essence, the heart of what Christ lived and exemplified. It is the *why* over it all, the transformation he sought to impart to his inner circle

¹⁴ Robert D. Lupton, *Compassion, Justice, and the Christian Life: Rethinking Ministry to the Poor* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 2007), 15–17.

¹⁵ Josh Packard and Ashley Hope, *Church Refugees: Sociologists Reveal Why People Are Done with Church But Not Their Faith* (USA: Group), 133.

¹⁶ DiVietro, "Understanding Diversification," 66.

¹⁷ Thom Rainer, "Celebration of Criticism," *Global Church Growth* 30 (1993): 6.

during three years of real world engagement. Mission, the full, evangelistic sense of it, is ultimately about being Christ-like. It is all about our love and character formation extending outward to others.

Therefore, my aim was to deepen evangelism by building it theologically around the emulative pattern of Christ and by helping Christians to see how powerfully Jesus pinpointed his words to each individual he encountered. Infused with a completely new set of fluid skills, Jesus' ability to *draw the heart* was entirely opposite from our modern presentation thinking. We start with us; he started with them. His "soul whispering" encompasses intimate relationship with the Father always guiding, impassioned love for the lost, and the ability to read the deepest needs and storylines of every soul. In this, mission leads believers into maturation—living out the intimacy, heart, manners, actions, compassion, skills, and fruit of Christ in the world. One reader reviewed, "*Soul Whisperer*, using Jesus as a model, shatters the old methods by integrating evangelism with the very core of our life in Christ."¹⁸

A NEW INFLUENCE PARADIGM

Clarifying distinction, the new paradigm is not based on the traditional telling motif but rather on the impetuses and parameters of influence. Here is where it gets controversial. Let me be quick to say, I am evangelical orthodox and favor full communication of the essential truths (the telling part) leading to faith decisions when the time is right to do so. From an academic standpoint, the demarcation between the two approaches is significant. Consider that if evangelism is about telling (the essential truths and their legal implications for salvation), then when you mention "evangelism," most rather quickly check out mentally. They already know how to explain the basic truths and make the pitch, so there is nothing to learn. Many have had training under a particular telling approach, such as, *The 4 Spiritual Laws*, *Evangelism Explosion*, *Steps to Peace*, *Share Your Faith Without Fear*, etc., and there is a whole slew of current "telling" renditions. While most churches and the majority of members may not choose these mechanisms today for various reasons (unnatural, forced, or ineffective), it is the reductionist way we all have been conditioned to think about evangelism that is, in my view, what is hindering the whole church from a much greater gospel movement.

You see, shift the conversation from "telling" to having "spiritual influence" with someone, and suddenly we have an enormous amount to learn. It is revolutionizing! Broad, anthropomorphic themes of healing, shame, honesty, brokenness, and authenticity (and sociological patterns of identity conditioning) are all factors to study under this faith formation umbrella.

¹⁸ Amazon book review of *Soul Whisperer*, posted March 5, 2017.

Framing the wider target, Christians know little about how to influence many unsaved friends—how to help them *be able and want to* follow Jesus. Yes, *want*. In fact, I marvel over the gap even with pastors. I asked a pastoral friend if he had ever won the mind of an atheist to his faith. Never. Did he know anything about reaching a Muslim? Nothing. I sat in a gathering of pastors one day where someone mentioned how “church members would simply love those Muslims to Christ.” I could not hold my tongue, interjecting, “You won’t reach any Muslim by just showing love. We must be able to answer Islam.” They all looked back in a blank stare. Oversimplifications do not help us reach peoples or cultures that begin more distant from Christ.

Breaking down Christ’s influence approach makes it accessible:

Start where they are.

Read what they need.

Know where to take them.¹⁹

As to understanding the individual or group, two reads are vital. (1) What message is resonant (a dynamic skill called “the gospel key” that is developed in the book. We have a phrase, “The key precedes the cross.”) (2) What processing is necessary. Both reads position the Christian into a place in which spiritual influence is more likely to unfold. We have thought in terms of telling when we need to think in terms of influence and process. Granted that the Spirit is over it all, what will it take to win over my friend, or that family, or that faith for Christ? Rarely is anyone reached by a simple, one-hit-wonder talking to a stranger with whom they have no ongoing relationship. Solid studies like the Vision New England Recent Convert Study make clear, relational influence the rule.²⁰ The cold approach does not give us the right angle for disciple making, which is the preeminent call (Mt 28:18–20).

Over the last year, I have been meeting regularly with our local mosque’s Imam, and let me say, getting members on a learning curve to reach those farther out is vital in this era. Despite the political debate raging in America in contrast to Canada’s open door policy, immigration will continue to bring the world to our doorstep. Yet, the church, for the most part, is unprepared. We must sharpen ourselves to penetrate the most distant rings with God’s strategic expansionary gospel! To do that, the acquiring of processing insight is paramount.

Synced for the wider range and dynamic adaption, the book is a revisionist plea to return to the drawing board and reteach our members how to approach the all-important evangelistic task. It gives practical teeth to a beloved church growth principle, the receptivity concept elevated by

¹⁹ Comer, *Soul Whisperer*, 3.

²⁰ Vision New England Recent Convert Study, 2008, <http://www.visionnewengland.org/partner/Articl...,PTID14438%7CCHID114781%7CCIID2314274,00.html> (1 of 2) [1/23/2008 9:04:49 PM].

Donald McGavran in *The Bridges of God*. As a leading pioneer and father of missiology, McGavran used his own India experiment to ask new, critical questions. How does the gospel seed and spread? How does it affect people movementally? One fact that should never be lost is that, as McIntosh details, every one of the movements to be studied began with a key individual being reached.²¹ We do not simply reach masses; we reach individuals who reach others, then groups, then whole tribes. Thus, personal and group evangelism is not mutually exclusive from mass movements but rather the fire starter for them. In the church, every individual reached by a member opens the possibility to reach expanding circles. However, when the members have no clarity or skill development to fulfill their calling, the movement stops. That is our current sad picture with the majority of North American churchgoers.

While I was in India observing the Disciple Making Movements strategy in both urban and rural contexts, movement happened person-to-person and family-to-family. Of course, the more hierarchical and group oriented the culture, the greater potential for the gospel to advance through an extended family/group/culture member. To counterbalance, the more independent, global, and urbanized the world becomes (in 2009, the urban population surpassed rural areas and is expected to continue to rise²²), the more individualized the gospel disseminates. I am not implying cultural and sociological forces are not factors in the population centers. The religious person holding to the faith of his heritage has a million familial reasons to do so, yet there is a difference of mindset and exposure in cities.

My astute African pastor friend Zachary King'ory told me about Nairobi, "In the cities, people are where they are regarding faith not by chance, but by choice." He is recognizing a scope of knowledge within urban environments. These are not people living with the zebras who have never heard of Christ or his church. They are aware and, I will add, wary of our aggressive approaches. They are also on social media. Did you notice the refugees of Aleppo tweeting during their horrific ordeal? They are already exposed to religions at some level. For the bulk, it is not that they have not heard that they do not believe; it is that they choose not to. Now I realize there can be rational and emotional reasons before you get to the motivational one, but if we do not teach members how to help their friends to see the value and relevancy of faith, we will not win their hearts to Christ.

The *Soul Whisperer* premise counter-intuits the traditional "telling paradigm," which has dominated the church mindscape (general folk wisdom)

²¹ Gary McIntosh, "Donald McGavran: An Evangelistic Missionary," *Great Commission Research Journal* (2017): 34–35.

²² United Nations Population Division, 2009, accessed November 14, 2016, <http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/publications/urbanization/urban-rural.shtml>.

and which does not give proper weight to receptivity factors inherent with individuals or groups. In other words, I tried to convey where we are falling down, saying, “The challenge we face with reaching most today is not in the telling, but the taking,”²³ and when it comes to gospel communication, “It’s not about telling, it’s about helping people to hear.”²⁴ If we did not get to the place where people had truly heard the gospel in a resonant way—where they would want to respond and live it out (which includes journeying forward with others and sometimes includes their group, subculture, or tribe)—then we had not achieved anything at all. My polemic is that the Great Commission aim is not merely to tell but rather to influence—to initiate a faith formation process that makes real disciples. That was Jesus’ true goal. It is why he so often said, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.” Jesus was an influencer, not a teller.

That means outside the staged proclamation context of our church services in much of the world today, we should put down our megaphones and dump our static formulas. The conversation starts with understanding their perspective, not our proclamation. We must first understand them to discern how they will hear our message. When I interviewed Joshua Stock, president of Snowboarders for Christ, he told me, “the last thing that his crowd (mostly Millennials) would receive is something that sounded like a pitch.”²⁵ In postmodern culture, the authenticity of the Christian is essential to gospel conveyance. Make the shift. Stop presenting, start reading where they are, and let that guide your words. Thinking through what is receivable from us via our character and the particularization of appeal is a radical reversal, but it is entirely biblical and perfectly suited for our time.

Observing the many encounters Jesus had with individuals, a pattern emerges. Notice the disparateness between John 3 and 4, which includes a man of Jewish religious elite status seeking understanding and a common sinful Samaritan woman seeking water. How odd if Jesus had presented the same message. Of course, he did not. From his assessment of whom he was talking to, his words were pinpoint dialed to achieve dramatic results. The high-ranking leader heard something disturbing: all his great religiosity meant nothing. Boom! “He must be born again” (Jn 3:3–5). The Samaritan woman heard something thrilling: she could have “living water” welling up within her (Jn 4:13). He walked away pensive; she scurried away to tell a whole town! The pattern becomes clear: custom-dial your words to the storyline of each hearer. Notice how the words, in themselves, drew and created their receptivity. Notice too, that if Jesus had not given them each a picture, s/he would not have come up with it him/

²³ Comer, *Soul Whisperer*, ix.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 10.

²⁵ Joshua Benedict Stock (president of Snowboarders for Christ) in discussion with the author, February 22, 2014.

herself. Therefore, like Jesus, we are the ones who must paint that out for them.

Contrary to what is propagated popularly, the verbalization of the gospel can be vital to meaningful relationship and spiritual formation.²⁶ Yet, the vast church membership has little knowledge of Christ’s mission manners, and thus, stumbles on how to relate and draw others toward spiritual desire. Consider a sampling of Jesus’ pinpointed personal encounters:

PEOPLE	NEED	SYMBOL	STORY
Nicodemus JOHN 3	INCEPTION	Birth	<i>Religious teacher learns he must begin all over again by God's Spirit.</i>
Samaritan Woman JOHN 4	INFILLING	Well	<i>Soul thirsting woman hears about experiencing "living water."</i>
Adulterous Captive JOHN 8	INSULATION	Scrawl	<i>An expose' question protects a guilty woman from self-righteous accusers & shame.</i>
Canaanite Inquirer MATTHEW 15	INSTIGATION	Dogs	<i>Derogatory words stir up a foreigner's exceptional faith.</i>
Zacchaeus LUKE 19	INCLUSION	Home	<i>Jewish tax-collecting outcast receives an inclusive invitation.</i>
Rich Young Ruler MARK 10	INCISION	Release	<i>The command to release riches seeks to scalpel an idolatrous heart.</i>
Hemorrhaging Woman MARK 5	INSTILLING	Knees	<i>A call out from the crowd cements her newfound faith.</i>

Because the paradigm is dynamic with its “reading” component, it works in all contexts and cultures, from local to global, and is never usurped by the shifting landscape. I do not want to teach something for here that will not work there. We must train our people to be on mission everywhere. I apply the thinking with every non-believer I come alongside, whether in Orange County, San Francisco, London, Cairo, or Kolkata. The traditional telling approach touted in churches across the land (folk wisdom) is not sensitive to a person’s starting point, has little regard for relationship building, and fails to imbue gospel resonance. It is a hit-and-miss kind of deal, and it mostly misses its target. Jesus’ words, on the other hand, were personal and powerful, perfectly placed, and super impactful.

Jesus’ understanding of faith formation process is also developed in many passages. He circled back to “find” people he had healed, so faith formation can take place (see Jn 5 and 9). In Mark 7 and 8, Jesus gives a back-to-back, almost identical sequence of actions to achieve faith formation, showing how much he figured their human processing need. Again, it is not about telling; it is about journeying with them long enough, and with enough faith formational dialogue and demonstration, to get to the place that they could

²⁶ Paul G. Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews: An Anthropological Understanding of How People Change* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 15.

hear what you have to say. That is very different from the way the vast majority of Christians think about evangelism. They think it is throwing in a quick word here or there with someone in the moment, but that is insufficient to fulfill the discipling call. The resultant fruit is nothing.

CLEAR DEFINITION AND SKILL DEVELOPMENT

At the Exponential Conference, Ed Stetzer distributed a statistical handout and then offered a summary word, “The one thing they concluded was evangelism must be intentional.”²⁷ Certainly there is value here. Trying beats un-trying every time! In all fairness to Stetzer, I realize he was providing a thirty thousand foot point of view. That instance, however, was also a stark example of the ambiguity that is strangling today’s church. Much of what congregations are doing in the name of evangelism is intentional and ineffective, sometimes even counterproductive, pushing people farther from faith. It is true. Twenty five percent of the churches in America’s largest denomination, the Southern Baptist Convention (15 million members), reported no baptisms in 2012.²⁸ Staggering. Even church plants, our most mission-focused entities, can portray ineffectiveness. *Outreach Magazine* published an article stating that two-thirds of church plants leaned un-evangelistic, gathering primarily Christians.²⁹ Ouch! As a coaching director of a church-planting network, I perused reports from church planters for three years and observed miniscule evangelistic fruit and for some months on end, nil.

Back to my point, if we are to realize the members’ evangelistic potential, how can we teach and raise the efficacy of anything if it is not well defined? If evangelism were everything (intentional), I would argue it is nothing. Nothing they can follow. Spiritual influence only gets dynamic when it gets specific. Using Michael Green’s breakdown of evangelism word clusters, we should make a distinction between public proclamation of pastors and planters (platform: *Kerusso*, meaning, “To proclaim like a herald”) and member process (interpersonal: *Martureo*, meaning, “To bear witness of facts and truths to be vouched for.”³⁰) Though the gospel message is the same, and there can be some overlap of principles, the way to effectually approach each is entirely divergent. I coach, “Like beer and wine, don’t mix the two!”

²⁷ Ed Stetzer (presentation, Exponential Conference, Mariners Church, Newport, CA, February 22, 2016).

²⁸ Rick Wilkins, “Is the Southern Baptists Decline Real,” *Urban Christian News*, January 10, 2017.

²⁹ Lizette Beard, “Vanishing Evangelism: The Sobering Case of Church Plants and Evangelism,” *Outreach Magazine*, July 21, 2016. <http://www.outreachmagazine.com/features/18479-vanishing-evangelism.html>.

³⁰ Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1970), 48–70.

Along with the pattern of Christ, we need to give members a sound definition for evangelism that helps them understand precisely what they are called to practice. What you aim for is what you will get! The following is the four-fold definition from my book. (Notice it is based on “influence” not “telling.”) Evangelism is “Partnering with God in the process of shaping the mind and heart to believe and follow.”³¹ The four dimensions give clarity to your people on what Jesus is calling them to be and do. Parsing it is helpful: (1) partnering with God (that is spiritual and exciting), (2) in the process (that means it is an ongoing, relational work), (3) to shape their mind and heart (that requires knowledge and skills), and (4) lead them to believe and follow (that is our end goal—not decisions, but disciples). This agency of the Father working intimately through each follower occurs when believers come alongside unsaved people they know or are getting to know to help them reach the place of belief and followership.

In dire contrast, Christians every day have golden gospel openings right before them, and yet they know not how to steward those opportunities. Most do not know how to get positioned relationally, how to frame the conversation, how to deepen bonds with unsaved people, how to dialogue and draw out vital information, or how to read needs and interpret faith’s meaning. These are vital mission skills. They have to be taught and then practiced within real, situational engagement. If they are to embody them, it will require a commitment to those outside the faith, whereupon their character will grow in Christ’s seeking love.

One of our *Launch Point* groups (my mission training curriculum for small groups) ended up leading five people to Christ within a six-month span (not typical by any means). Four of the five were outside the group, but with continuing relationship, we saw all but one successfully enfolded into church fellowships. By the way, this group of twelve from a per capita measurement just “out-missioned” most steeples in the land. The salvation stories were case studies in themselves.

One of our mission trainees met a Japanese woman whose American husband confessed to having been unfaithful with one hundred women. As she listened to this wife unload, she kept praying and asking repeatedly, “What is her need?” Hearing the overwhelmed feelings of utter shock, she noticed a massive planter close to their table, pointed to it, and said, “Maiko, you were not made to carry that planter, and you cannot carry this burden.” She then talked with her about Jesus, the only One who could carry her burden. Like Christ’s living water metaphor with the Samaritan woman, the planter metaphor became the communication piece that led to her faith. A week later when they met again, with tears streaming down her face, Maiko cried out in prayer, embracing her Mighty Savior!

³¹ Comer, *Soul Whisperer*, 149.

This trainee would instruct her group to apply the concepts, “We need to stop talking and draw out their thoughts and feelings first.” Then notice how she was focused on the interpretation part: “What is her need?”

Listening > Discovery > Interpretation > Communication³²

According to the training diagram, she creates a picture to show what a relationship with Christ would mean. Can you see what is happening here? She is working the skills. When we equip in churches, and when believers apply these skills, we found through story after story, they see fruit. Thus, the adage is clear: *skills precede the story*.

If your church members do not understand the concept of “framing,” gospel relationship opportunities will fall by the wayside. We teach specific dialogue-line techniques to get the conversation moving in a relationship-building and spiritually open way. Establishing “safety” and inviting dialogue is necessary for influence to unfold. One day, I heard a friend’s daughter say she was going to use her college speech course to present the gospel. I know how great that idea seems to many but not to me. Though this may sound almost heretical, my input to her was, “Don’t do it!” I further explained why. Uninvited apart from relationship within a university context, it will likely distance the whole class from you. Instead, get alongside one or two unsaved women. Get to know them. Deepen your relationship through honest disclosure. Draw their true thoughts and feelings about faith and religion. Seek God to discover what his words would be for them according to their unique needs, drives, and dreams. Then share. The chances of having them hear you and respond to the gospel just elevated one hundred fold! Who would you want to impart the faith to your children, the random teller who shares and leaves or the relational influencer who invests and stays?

We also teach mission “know how” on reaching eight common types: God accusers, cultural Christians, moralists, pleasure seekers, progressives, theistic skeptics, atheists, and those from other faiths. These were case stories that we observed what it took to reach people from different perspectives and worldviews. (Paul Hiebert’s *Transforming Worldviews* is a notable contribution³³.) Again, you do not appeal to or reel in disparate starting points the same way. In the book, I coined it “evangelistic mapping.” Third most difficult part of Jesus’ paradigm is *know where to take them*.

From my own journeys with two skeptics stepping into faith, God showed me how to work the process of reaching those who begin farther from God and belief, including atheists, agnostics, skeptics, or those from other religions. The method of stringing together multiple points, which I

³² Ibid., 86–87.

³³ Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews*.

call “platform building,” is the way to garner leverage for them to eventually stand and move forward in faith. God’s Spirit has to break through, but it is a thrilling architectural work! Having clarity on what you are constructing is essential to getting to that holy moment.

I also stumbled into the recognition that both of my skeptic friends had made four faith-forming progressions. Many of us are schooled on the Engel’s scale, which numbers a person’s progress from gospel awareness, to repentance, to being a reproducing disciple.³⁴ Although I do prize how it highlights developmental process, I never found it very helpful from an evangelistic standpoint. Many skeptic or religious friends already know the gospel; telling will not do it. I needed something that revealed where the person was in his faith formation and where to focus next. During meetings with two skeptics side by side, God showed me something I had never seen before. I watched each journey through levels or progressions. The *Open to* > *Able to* > *Want to* > *Choose to* steps now guide me in faith formation with every evangelistic relationship I embrace.

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STEPS	“THE HANG UP”	HELP WITH...
OPEN TO	<i>Interest</i>	Asking
ABLE TO	<i>Reason</i>	Answers
WANT TO	<i>Motivation</i>	Appeal
CHOOSE TO	<i>Response</i>	Application

Trainees find themselves saying, “Oh, that’s where they are in the journey.” Within our post-Christian climate, scores must be drawn into the first stage of being open to explore and needing wider “attraction building” conversations to help them enter the search phase (another skill). We are only scratching the surface here. It is developed in detail in chapters 14–17 of *Soul Whisperer*.

THE RESEARCH WE NEED FOR CHANGE

I once read a missional book in which the authors admitted to not doing what they wrote about; it was what they aspired to do.³⁶ Another mission

³⁴ Will McRaney, *The Art of Personal Evangelism* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2003), 49–50.

³⁵ Comer, *Soul Whisperer*, 200–204.

³⁶ Tim Chester and Steve Timmis, *Total Church: A Radical Reshaping Around Gospel and Community* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 19.

lead said he had never gone on a missions trip; his calling was to point people there. I do not mean this to come across as judgmental, but I am not a fan. I have found that it is only after you get into the context of the unsaved and deep into relationship that the revolutionizing insights from God unveil.

Hunter's call for revisiting evangelism causes me to weigh in on which direction I think our research should go. In this new day and age of missionality, our research needs to leave the classroom and get closer to the hearts, minds, openings, barriers, and processes. Humbly recognizing that preaching inspiration is never enough, we must shift to firsthand learning at the safe houses, recovery rooms, community centers, temples and mosques, homeless shelters, businesses, neighborhood homes, clubs and coffeehouses, ball fields, and all outreach arms and extensions where believers come alongside unsaved persons and each particularized subculture. When I read J. Waskom Pickett's *The Confirmation of the Gospel*, I loved the many stories, like the Indian minister, seeing how Muslims had denigrated Christ's death and resurrection, had such a thoughtful, compelling, apologetic questioning on how the church's rise could have happened apart from it.³⁷ That kind of laser-sharp thinking occurs in the crucible of doing missions. Much clarity comes with intimate observational research, too.

During my doctoral study, the formal hypothesis approach was favored, in which an objective is made and then tested, enabling a conclusion to be drawn. If the conclusion is not laced with pre-interpretive bias, it can offer solid assessment, no doubt. However, in the evangelism arena, I believe what we need much more of is "participant observation" forms of research. This is when we get in close, which can be incognito, to see what is actually occurring as a participant and objective observer of both sides—message conduits and receptors. What is effective? Where are the breakdowns? What is needed to course correct? How does the church empower gospel fruition?

As an example, Josh Packard's "dones" inquiry was primarily based on this form of qualitative research. He makes a thoughtful point as to this choice, "People are used to seeing numbers explain the world around us. But numbers tell us very little, if anything, about people's experiences, interpretations, and processes."³⁸ Thus, his research relied on interview collection to form conclusions. This was also the main approach of J. Russell Hale, *The Unchurched: Who They Are and Why They Stay Away*, which synthesized the classic truth: "People can't hear until they have been heard."³⁹ Though data compilation can reveal big, sweeping trends, when it comes to evangelism, there is nothing like moving from black and white to the HD living color of

³⁷ J. Waskom Pickett, *The Confirmation of the Gospel: The Authenticating Role of Good Works* (Ann Arbor, MI: Edwards Brothers Malloy, 2016), 64–65.

³⁸ Packard and Hope, *Church Refugees*, 8.

³⁹ J. Russell Hale, *The Unchurched: Who They Are and Why They Stay Away*, (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1977), 183.

true looks. It is why I believe research must lean in the “participant observation” direction, and church growth writers would do well to broaden their voices to include thinkers from various philosophical veins.

Regarding research angles, as I alluded to earlier, many of our missiological issues stem from our presuppositions regarding receptivity. In local and global contexts, it is general folk wisdom error to perceive receptivity as being (1) inside, (2) immediate, and (3) inviolable. I would argue that these assumptions undermine gospel dissemination everywhere. Consider three North American mission precepts that contain partial fallacies.

Inside. In the new 1-in-5 playing fields, the “belong-before-believe” mantra of today’s attractive church must be reevaluated. Many are rising against it; I am not alone. As to its prominence, consider the 2014 *Outreach Magazine* article from Dan Kimball, where after describing the stories of eighteen people who were baptized, he writes, “In almost every case, the Sunday meeting is a major factor in a person’s decision to follow Jesus.” In the minds of leader legions, the church service enveloped evangelism.

It is true that belonging increases receptivity, and we should leverage the love of the Christian community for God’s ultimate mission. Yes, we are talking about a “both and” here. Still, should this limiting view of how gospel influence disseminates moor our thinking? I once was with a staff member who told me about his atheistic neighbor friend who loved having conversations with him, but then the staff member offered his conviction with “belong-before-believe” as basis for not investing time with this person. I tried to get him to see differently, but to no avail. I wonder, how many leaders out there in church land are just like him?

Immediate. Church growth seeks those receptive. Although there are people coming towards us that we must explain Christ’s intervention and lead to faith, the majority today begin farther outside our realm. I had a most provocative conversation with Kenyan-born John Njoroge of Ravi Zacharias’s ministry team about this. While training in Kenya, John told me that what I was teaching, the idea of journeying with non-believers into the faith, was foreign there. He said, “Christians just share the gospel, and if they don’t respond, they move on.” Yet, John spoke of how the old forms of crusade evangelism were getting lesser and lesser results, and that atheism was suddenly on the rise in his country. He affirmed they needed the shift; they needed to learn how to create receptivity.

One of the most sobering takeaways from last year’s Great Commission Research Network’s conference was the message by George Martin who was candid enough to relay that there was little research to draw upon on reaching those of other religions.⁴⁰ Did your jaw drop, like mine? Where

⁴⁰ George Martin, “Growth in the Context of Demographic Change: The World’s Religions Have Come to Us” (presentation, Great Commission Research Conference, October 2016).

have we been? Like the Samaritan woman looking down a well and seeing a man without a utensil to draw water, we must bridge distance with new tools. Researchers can seek increasing levels and layers of insight on how to reach a diverse religious world. We need more than testimonies. We need analysis that can lead to greater inroads for reproducing gospel fruitfulness.

Inviolable. Though our gospel of salvation of faith alone in Christ, his death on the cross, and glorious rise from dead will always be the cornerstone of our message, the church tends to be rigid with its scope of gospel-related communication. We can easily make quick judgments and misreads on people who are far more open than we have estimated. With the eternal life emphasis, we can fail to see how much Christ leaned into the spiritual benefits and blessings of faith that readily connect with North America's present-day thinkers. Why do we have so many non-believers who see our gospel as irrelevant to their lives? The onus for changing that view is on us! Research can play a vital role in shaping how gospel communication develops in the future years.

As to church planting, how adaptable and progressive can we be in penetrating the various cultural and subculture contexts? Avoiding syncretism in its forms, research could highlight innovating outer-bound structures and vehicles that bring a powerful, symphonic gospel into our mixed, multicultural world. How will they hear? Who will they hear? What will they hear? Certainly, mission successes will inform every scenario. The sky is the limit on what new data could unveil and unpack for the furtherance of Christ's mandate. With hindrances lying within our presuppositions, it is time to put past assumptions and current mindsets under renewed scrutiny.

CONCLUSION

To some this side of the globe, perhaps there is no greater sports moment than what occurred in Lake Placid, New York, in the year 1980. The opening scene of the movie, *Miracle*, places coach Herb Brooks (HB) in a conversation with the US Olympic hockey selection committee (OC). Amid the intimidating talk of the Soviet's decades-long Olympic dominance, and even "spanking" the US pro All-Stars, in the film's recreation, Brooks pitches his vision to coach the amateur squad.

HB: "The only way we can compete with the Eastern bloc teams is if we are willing to change."

OC: "Change what?"

HB: "Everything. Change the way we train. Change the way we prepare, and even change the way we schedule—it needs to be tougher. Longer. We also need to change the way we play the game." (He proceeds to propose a hybrid of the Soviet and Canadian systems showing exactly what he envisioned was necessary.) "... the highest level of conditioning, speed, creativity, and, above all, team chemistry."

If you are going to cut down a giant like the renowned Soviet Union's hockey machine, someone had to see what it would take. Someone had to believe it could be done. That person was a studious, tape-watching dreamer named Herb Brooks. Our research can get us there, to be the first to see what others need to see, and to size up how to take on a rising, 1-in-5 giant. What an honor to provide a window to something of such significance! The research Dr. Hunter calls for will open innovative ways for a new day of God's miraculous kingdom expansion.

Later in the film before the big showdown unfurls leading to the gold medal game, Brooks gives his pre-game speech: "Great moments come from great opportunity. And that is what you have here, boys." What lies before church leadership is opportunity of a pivoting segue in the church's history. As we head to a projected 9.7 billion world population by 2050, a time when more people will be outside and farther from the church's joining circle than has ever existed, and when Islam threatens to surpass our influence status on the globe, we are confronted with a vision question. *Are we willing to change to meet the new challenge head on?* We must embrace *better ideas* on how to approach, prepare, and practice gospel mission. It is not called the Great Commission for nothing. Greatness beckons. It is our moment.

About the Author

Gary Comer received his D.Min. at Talbot Seminary. He is the author of *Soul Whisperer: Why the Church Must Change the Way it Views Evangelism*, and a four book *Missional Engagement Series*. His next book, *Re-Mission: Rethinking How Church Leaders Create Movement* is in process with Whitaker House publishers. Gary founded Soul Whisperer Ministries to raise the mission efficacy of churches, nationally and globally. Connect with Gary at: soulwhispererministry.com. Twitter: [gcomerministry](https://twitter.com/gcomerministry).