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Evangelism or Disciple-making?

Dr. Charles Arn

There is a growing body of evidence in church growth research, as well as in the practical experience of pastors and church leaders, to make the following somewhat startling observation: *Many current evangelism methods are, at best, irrelevant to church growth...and, at worse, are inhibiting the effective outreach of well-meaning Christians and churches.*

When I first considered this paradox I found it both curious, and somewhat discouraging. Certainly most churches can point to some results from their evangelistic endeavors. But if we are honest with ourselves, the “return on investment” of our people, time, and resources spent in evangelism does not show a healthy stewardship of the “talents” (Mt. 25:14-28) the Master has left in our care. In fact, the methods used in many evangelistic activities actually seems to be *confining* the Good News of the Gospel within the walls of the church!

But church growth research does not study traditions simply to create disorder in the status quo. Rather, it searches for best practices that can help develop best practices that will maximize results in response to Christ’s command to “...go and make disciples” (Mt. 28:20).

Toward this end, I would like to highlight some basic differences between traditional “evangelism,” as commonly practiced today, and “disciple-making,” a term that I believe should more accurately describe our efforts in response to the Great Commission. A more complete discussion of both the research and a “church growth model of evangelism” may be found in the book *The Master’s Plan for Making Disciples*.¹

What is “Success”?

This question highlights one of the basic differences between

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“evangelism” and “disciple-making:”

Evangelism. Success is achieved when a verbal response is given by a non-Christian, which indicates his/her endorsement of a set of convictions reflective of their new Christian faith.

Disciple-making. Success is achieved when a change in behavior is observed in a person, which indicates his/her personal integration of a set of convictions reflective of their new Christian faith.

It's a subtle, but fundamental, distinction. And because the *goals* are different, the *process* used to achieve the goals often differ.

The church growth goal, in response to the Great Commission, is “to proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, and to persuade people to become His disciples and responsible members of His Church”.² A responsible church member, of course, can only be identified through observation.

The evangelism goal, by contrast, generally has a *decision-oriented* objective, and focuses on leading a person to the expression of verbal repentance and commitment to Christ. Whereas a “decision” focuses on that specific event, a “disciple” focuses on an enduring life-style. Don't assume that decision-making and disciple-making are synonymous. Nearly every pastor can testify that not all “decisions” result in “disciples” and responsible church members.

Because evangelism defines success on the basis of a decision, its activities are typically designed to hasten such an event. The good news is that many evangelism methods are successful in doing just that. The bad news is that, in so doing, they may actually be diminishing the successful assimilation of people into active church involvement and discipleship. How so?

What is the Method?

Evangelism. The method focuses on bringing a person to an intellectual endorsement of Christian beliefs, observed by a verbal acknowledgement of these new beliefs. Since this endorsement of Christian values is validated through a verbal acknowledgement, the process of effective evangelism is a *verbal presentation* of such Christian convictions.

Disciple-making. The method focuses on bringing a person to a behavioral change that reflects the integration of Christian values into their life, as observed by their participation in the life and fellowship of a local church. Since endorsement of Christian values is validated through behavioral observation, the process of effective disciple-making is *experiential observation* of such Christian behavior by the non-Christian.

Of course, the two need not be mutually exclusive. But distinguishing the objectives helps us more clearly consider the best practices for achieving them. The key question is whether a non-Christian's lifelong values, attitudes, and life-style are more likely to be changed through the verbal presentation of information, or the experiential observation of behavior.

"Actions speak louder than words" is particularly true when it comes to bringing others to new faith and Christian discipleship. If the goal is a changed life, and not just repeated words, the method employed will make a difference in the result observed. The Apostle John makes a similar observation about sharing God's love with others: "Love is not a matter of words or talk, it must be genuine and show itself in action" (1 Jn. 3:18).

Effective disciple-making strategies should provide a number of opportunities for non-Christians to be with and to observe other Christians, so that non-Christians come into regular contact with a variety of believers in a variety of situations. Research, in fact, bears out the importance of multiple exposures to the Christian message and people. A study compared two groups of new believers, one made up of new converts who had become active church members in the year following their conversion; a second group who had dropped out of, or never gotten involved in, church following their conversion. The variable studied was the difference in the number of Christian exposures these people had had—*prior* to their conversion. The difference was significant. Active members had an average of six Christian exposures to the Gospel in the year prior to their conversion. Dropouts, by contrast, had seen or heard the Christian message only twice before their decision. The researcher's conclusion: "when non-Christians have multiple opportunities to see, hear, and experience the Christian message, they are more likely to understand the implications of their commitment, and thus have fewer surprises following their commitment."³ (And, are therefore more likely to stick with their commitment.) Traditional evangelism strategies, by contrast, often assert that "now is the moment," and encourage a response regardless of the history or context.

Who is Involved?

Evangelism. The assumption is that any individual can adequately represent the person of Christ and sufficiently model the Christian faith so as to cause a non-Christian to grasp the implications and meaning of being a Christian disciple.

Disciple-making. The assumption is that any individual Christian cannot adequately represent of the person of Christ, and

that only through exposure to the Body of Christ—the local church—can a non-Christian accurately perceive the implications and meaning of being a Christian disciple.

This distinction does not imply that a single Christian cannot lead another person to a new relationship with Christ. Of course many have. God uses any and all means to bring people to new life.

What these two statements do suggest is that in our response to Christ's Great Commission, we should be aware that the local church—with its complementary assortment of spiritual gifts—more accurately reflects the Body of Christ than any one individual member. Exposure to the local church provides the most accurate picture available of the incarnation of Christ in today's world. And when a person is exposed to the Body of Christ they are more likely to see and experience the incarnation of Christ on earth.

Using spiritual gifts in the church is an important strategy for disciple-making. In Scripture, we read that spiritual gifts are for the building up (i.e., *growth*) of the Body of Christ (I Cor. 4:12). While all Christians are expected to be able to give witness to the hope that is within them (I Peter 3:15), this does not mean that every Christian is a gifted evangelist. According to the New Testament, there are some in the church—with the spiritual gift of evangelist (Eph. 4:11)—who are better able to lead people to new Christian faith.⁴

But could a person have a role in making disciples if he/she does not have the gift of evangelist, but has, say, the gift of hospitality? Of course! This person's most effective witness may simply be in opening his/her home to non-Christian friends, church visitors, or persons in need. As a result, using one's gift in disciple-making does not require that every Christian possess the characteristics required in traditional evangelism: extroverted personality, verbal fluency, resolute tenacity, good memory, and quick answers to complex questions. Disciple-making simply means using your unique spiritual gift, in concert with others' gifts, in the overall process of bringing people into the family of God.

Over 30 years ago Win Arn and Donald McGavran made an important observation in their groundbreaking book *How to Grow a Church*:

You would misuse Christ's gifts if you used them solely for the service of existing Christians. That is not why these gifts are given. As we see God's overwhelming concern for the salvation of humanity, we must assume that His gifts are given, at least in large part, that the lost

may come to know Him, whom to know is life eternal.⁵

Frankly, it is a guilt-producing inaccuracy to suggest that every Christian should be an evangelist. In the New Testament there are only three places where the word “evangelist” is used (and the word “evangelism” is never used). In each case it refers to exercising the particular spiritual gift and/or performing a special activity expected of only certain persons. Acts 21:8 describes Philip—the evangelist. In II Timothy 4:5 Paul tells Timothy to “do the work of an evangelist.” And in Ephesians 4:11 the spiritual gift of evangelist is introduced. Evangelists were those select people responsible to “tell the Good News of victory in battle” (the Greek meaning of evangelist). At the same time, there are over a hundred references in the New Testament where followers of Christ are called upon to spread the Good News of the Christian faith. The mistaken assumption of many evangelism approaches is that “making disciples” means telling the Good News—which is actually the work of the gifted evangelist. The most effective strategy for disciple-making is to build on the unique gifts of each member of the body, and develop a strategy for using those gifts—in concert—to share the love of God with others. Remember, the more Christians (i.e., the more parts of the Body) a potential disciple knows, the more complete his/her understanding of God’s love.

What is the Approach?

The approach which Christians take in presenting the Gospel of Christ to a non-believer has a great deal to do with their eventual results.

Evangelism. There are two possible approaches that traditional evangelism takes in the persuasion process. The first is a “content” approach. This approach sees evangelism as presentation of facts that the hearer needs to know in order to make a reasonable decision. The content of the Christian message can be communicated verbally, or in print, or electronically, or through audio-visual medium. In this view, when the content of the Christian message has been adequately presented, it is reasonable to ask for a response (i.e., a decision for Christ). Any Christian can succeed in evangelism if he/she learns how to present the content of the Gospel correctly. The relationship between the Christian and non-Christian (if there is one) is characteristic of the relationship between a teacher-to-student, with the objective being to communicate correct information.

A second approach sometimes employed in evangelism methodology is the “manipulative” approach. This approach sees evangelism as a process of using the right technique to so-

licit a decision. The approach could be an emotional appeal, or leading a person through a set of previously rehearsed questions and answers. Evangelism training, in this approach, means teaching the correct technique. With the manipulative approach, any Christian can succeed in evangelism if he/she learns the right persuasive approach. The relationship between the Christian and the non-Christian in this approach is characteristic of a salesman-to-customer, the objective being to get a positive decision.

Disciple-making. This approach to the persuasion process is “relational.” It sees conversion as the result of a genuine relationship of caring, listening, sharing, and trusting between the Christian and non-Christian. This approach—which, by the way, takes considerably more time than the other approaches—assumes that God’s love is most accurately experienced through the love of God’s people. The assumption behind this approach is that since every non-Christian is different, one pre-planned and pre-canned approach will not work. In the relational approach, any Christian can succeed if he/she learns how to love. The relationship between the Christian and the non-Christian, in this approach, is characteristic of a friend-to-friend, the goal being to allow God’s irresistible love to be experienced.

A seminal research study considered whether there was a relationship between how a Christian viewed the evangelistic process and the subsequent result of his/her evangelistic endeavors.⁶ The study isolated three groups of subjects (240 people in each group) who received an evangelistic presentation: 1) one group were those who, in response to an evangelistic presentation, made a Christian commitment and became subsequently involved in a local church; 2) a second were those who made a commitment, but had no ensuing church involvement; 3) those who did not positively respond at all to the evangelistic presentation. The results were startling! Seventy percent (169 of the 240) of the now Christians and active church members came to their faith through a Christian who employed a relational approach (“friend-to-friend,” as the researcher called it). In contrast, 87% of those persons (209 of 240) who made a verbal commitment but were not active in a church had come to their decision through a person who viewed evangelism as manipulative (“salesman-to-customer”). And, of those who did not convert, 75% (180 of 240) had been presented with the Gospel by someone who saw evangelism as sharing content, facts, and theology (“teacher-to-student”). This study seems to indicate that a manipulative approach to evangelism (salesman-to-customer) actually results in the greatest percentage of persons making a verbal

decision. However, the dropout rate of such an approach is 8 of every 10! As mentioned earlier, the goal of evangelism can affect the method. If the goal is to get a decision, a manipulative method apparently works best. But this approach seems to actually be counter-productive...if the goal is making disciples.

What about Assimilation?

In a few evangelistic approaches today the matter of a person's eventual involvement in a local church is not considered critical, and "the results are left up to God." Such approaches assume that the Great Commission will be fulfilled when everyone in the world has been exposed to the content of the Gospel. But, in general, most evangelizers express a genuine desire that their converts find a place of involvement in a local congregation. Assuming this is the desire, what are the differing assumptions about how new believers are assimilated into a church?

Evangelism. The assumption is that a *common faith* between the new believer and the church member is the basis upon which active church membership can be built.

Disciple-making. The assumption is that *common relationships* between the new believer and other church members is the basis upon which active membership can be built.

Numerous studies in the field of church growth indicate that the primary reason people remain involved in their church is the friendships and relationships they establish with other members. And, when people do drop out, the reason is usually a *relational* issue, not a theological one. One study found that when dropouts were asked why they left their church, 81% responded that they did not feel a "sense of belonging" in that church. And when asked what would be most important in their search for a new church home, 75% said: "the friendliness of the people."⁷ Another study found that persons who became active church members made an average of seven new friends in the church, while dropouts made less than two.⁸

Actually, the assimilation of a newcomer into a local church should begin long *before* their conversion. Friendships that non-Christians develop with members of your church will be a key part in their eventual assimilation into your church. In fact, one of the most fruitful activities your evangelism committee could engage in during the coming year is to help members develop or strengthen friendships with non-Christians! That will have a far greater impact on your church's outreach and growth than training those same people to verbally present the plan of salvation.

But with such an idea you may hear the reaction: "If we make friends with non-Christians and invite them to church ac-

tivities it will adversely affect our Christian community. Consider the strategy of one of the most productive disciple-makers in recent history:

John Wesley had three ultimate objectives for people: 1) That they experience the grace of God and the gift of faith, and become conscious followers of Jesus Christ. 2) That they become part of a class or group of believers. 3) That, upon achievement of 1 and 2, the experience growth toward Christian perfection. It is crucial to point out that the first two objectives could be achieved in a person's life history in either order, and the more usual sequence was 2, and then 1.

That is, most of the people who became Methodist converts first joined a Bible study group and sometime later became conscious Christians! This helps to explain why Wesley, in his extensive open-air field preaching, *never* invited people to accept Jesus Christ and become Christians on the spot! This statement must surely shock those of us whose assumptions about public evangelism have been carved out in the Billy Graham era, as it would shock the evangelical Christians of any generation since Charles Finney first began inviting responders to the "mourner's bench."⁹

Lyle Schaller makes a similar observation:

The ones most likely to become active members are those who become part of a group where membership in that face-to-face small group is meaningful *before* formally uniting with that congregation. They are assimilated before they join.¹⁰

Flavil Yeakley, a church growth researcher who closely studied the differences between church drop-outs and active members, concluded his doctoral dissertation by observing:

When people have no meaningful contact with church members in the process of their conversion, they are likely to feel no meaningful identification with that church after their conversion, and are therefore likely to drop out.¹¹

The fact is that it would do many churches a world of good to have an abundance of pagans in their midst! Certainly Christ did not shrink from the prospect of sitting, eating, and talking with sinners. Indeed, he was known as a friend of sinners (Luke 7:34).

Yet some churches that pride themselves in their evangelistic

fervor would have little tolerance for cigarette butts on the church property, dirty blue jeans in the sanctuary, or cuss words in the classes. I listened to the story of one pastor recently who had brought a teenage Christian rock group to the church for a Saturday night event. Over 700 young people from the community had attended and heard the Gospel, and over three dozen indicated a desire to commit their lives to Christ. But the next morning, because the custodian had been out of town, members discovered empty beer bottles by the dozens in the parking lot. Imagine, if you can, the reaction of many long-attending church members! But it could have been a cause for celebration...the world had finally come to their church!

People today who respond to Christ's Gospel are those who respond to the love and caring of Christ's people. People do not respond to religious opinions or theological arguments. They are not talked into the Kingdom...they are loved in. Reflecting God's unconditional love is the essence of the Gospel...for God is love. And love is *experienced*, not explained. We've all heard the saying, "people don't care how much we know...until they know how much we care. It reflects a great disciple-making strategy that Christ taught us: Love God first...then others as much as you do yourself (Mt. 22:39). And then, as He said, go and make disciples (Mt. 28:20).

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NOTES

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2. Donald McGavran & Win Arn. *Ten Steps to Church Growth*. NY: Harper & Row, 1977, p. 1.
3. Flavil Yeakley. *Why Churches Grow*. Arcata, OK: Christian Communications, 1981, p. 37.
4. Peter Wagner, *Discover Your Spiritual Gift*. Ventura, CA: Gospel Light Publishers, 2005, p. 30-31.

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5. Donald McGavran & Win Arn, *How to Grow a Church*. Ventura, CA: Gospel Light Publishers, 1973, p. 36.
6. Flavil Yeakley. "Views of Evangelism" in *The Pastor's Church Growth Handbook*. (Win Arn, ed.), Pasadena: Church Growth Press, 1988, p. 139.
7. "Friendliness: A Key to Growing Churches" in *The Win Arn Growth Report*, No. 14, p. 3.
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9. George Hunter, III. *To Spread the Power: Church Growth in the Wesleyan Spirit*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1987.
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11. Flavil Yeakley. op. cit. p. 285.