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Evangelism in the USA: A Look Back and a Look Ahead

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Abstract

Innovations in approaches, methods, and techniques for fruitful evangelism are a hallmark of the church in the United States. This article explores eleven evangelistic innovations observed in the last half of the twentieth century and offers seven insights for the future.

Keywords: American history, evangelism, gospel, disciple making, innovation

Evangelism. Depending on your experience, the word brings cheers or jeers. Cheers because someone once shared the Good News with you, that is, they evangelized you, which led you to personal faith in Christ. Jeers because the word dredges up images of manipulation, undue pressure, or misguided coercion. Whatever the images or feelings, there is no doubt that evangelism is a biblical, as well as a necessary component of a growing church.

Evangelism is Biblical

Biblically, the noun evangelion, meaning good news, appears in the New Testament seventy-five times and is usually translated as gospel. This word is coupled with other words, e.g., “The gospel of the kingdom” (Matthew 4:23; 9:35, 24:14, NASB); “the gospel of God” (Mark 1:14; Romans 1:1; 15:16; 2 Corinthians 11:7; 1 Thessalonians 2:2, 9; 1 Peter 4:17, NASB); and “the
The gospel of Jesus Christ” (Mark 1:1; cf. Romans 15:19; 1 Corinthians 9:12; 2 Corinthians 2:12; 9:13; 10:14; Galatians 1:17; 1 Thessalonians 3:2; 2 Thessalonians 1:8, NASB). The passages which refer to personal salvation emphasize Jesus Christ as the content of the gospel message. One passage of Scripture provides the essential ingredients of the gospel:

Now I make known to you, brethren, the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received, in which also you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast to the word which I preached to you, unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve (1 Corinthians 15:1-5, NASB).

Comparing this passage to other verses (see Luke 24:46-48; Acts 2:22-23; 3:125; 4:10; 10:39ff: Romans 1:4; 4:25), “Paul seems to be saying that the gospel consists of (1) the fact that Christ died for our sins, the proof of which is His burial; and (2) the fact that Christ was raised from the dead, the proof of which is His appearance” (Howard, 1978, p. 2). The essential ingredient of the gospel is “Christ died for our sins,” but his death is of no value without the resurrection, since the resurrection demonstrates “Christ’s death has been accepted by the Father as substitutionary payment for our sins, that He is indeed God’s Son, and that He can now apply the benefits of His death (John 16:10; Romans 1:4; 4:25)” (Howard, 1978, p. 2). Given Paul’s warning in Galatians 1:6-9 that anyone who preaches a different gospel is accursed, it is crucial to pay attention to this content of the gospel as described by him.

This gospel of salvation is to be shared with others, as numerous Scripture passages assert. Christ’s command to “make disciples of all the nations” requires evangelism, and is included in the participle “going” [most often translated as “Go”]. Disciples are only made as believers go among unbelievers, build relationships, live, and speak the gospel to those whom they encounter. The Book of Acts demonstrates the early church members understood this. Christ told them, “You shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest parts of the earth” (Acts 1:8, NASB). Following the early persecution of the church in Jerusalem, people were scattered into Judea and Samaria where they “went about preaching the word” (8:4, NASB). The Apostle Paul explains that God has given all of us the ministry of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:14-21, NASB). As such, we are to make the most of every
evangelistic opportunity toward unbelievers. Paul’s exhortation to “Let your speech always be with grace, as though seasoned with salt, so that you will know how you should respond to each person” suggests that every believer has a part in evangelism through everyday conversations (Colossians 4:5-6, NASB).

**Evangelism is Necessary**

Mankind is a relational creature. Made in the image of God (Genesis 1:28), the Creator declared it was not good for mankind to be alone (Genesis 2:18). Chapters 4 to 10 of Genesis report how from the beginning mankind gathered in groups of families, clans, tribes, and nations. Mankind has always gathered in social groups, and Christ commissioned us to disciple *panta ta ethne* that is, all the groups in society (Matthew 28:18-20).

In sociological models of group formation and development, there are typically five prerequisites for groups to exist (Moburg, 1962; Mott, 1965; Scheine, 2010). These include (1) Recruitment or reproduction, for example, births to replace deaths and departures, (2) Socialization, such as learning the language, customs, and practices of the group, (3) Production of goods and services, such as food, clothing, tools, education, and activities, (4) Preservation of order, such as protection, safety, and freedom, and (5) a sense of purpose, for example, ultimate meaning, service, love, or care. Evangelism, of course, fulfills the first of these five functions. All groups require the addition of new people if the group is to continue. If there are no additions to a social group, the group in time dies out. Since churches are a type of social group, there is a continuing need for new people to be added to the group. All local churches are only a generation away from extinction. If new people are not added to a church through biological, transfer, or conversion growth, the church will eventually go out of existence (See McGavran & Arn, 1974, pp. 57-60).

Thus, evangelism is necessary for the continuing existence of a church. A church that lacks evangelistic concern is most often a dying church. Respected church consultant Lyle Schaller explained that one characteristic nearly every growing congregation has in common is “an active evangelistic emphasis” which “has its most important expression in lay persons” (Schaller, 1975, pp. 150-153). Well-regarded expert on reaching secular people, George Hunter, adds “The one reason why so many congregations do not grow—they do not engage in intentional evangelism. The other reason is that they do engage in evangelism—but in ways which are outmoded, or not indigenous to the culture of the target population” (Hunter, 1979, p. 20).
A Brief Overview of the History of Evangelism in the United States

The practice of evangelism has existed since the first churches were planted on North American soil. Early churches focused evangelism toward their own families through Word and Sacrament. Children were socialized in Christian families and churches where they found faith, were baptized properly, and added to the church (biological growth). Since most of the first churches in North America were composed of people from a single ethnic group, wherever the people from the group moved, new churches were started for the faithful. In time many others were drawn to faith while listening to the preaching of the gospel, or by observing the faithful lives of believers.

The First Great Awakening (1730-1740)
The First Great Awakening found new interest in evangelism in the form of revivals spurred by Solomon Stoddard (1643-1729), Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758), and George Whitefield (1714-1770). Most of these revivals were in the larger cities of the colonies, although some were seen on the expanding frontier. The revivals helped usher in new ideas of democratic thought, such as a free press, as well as seeing new forms of preaching develop focusing on initiating spiritual response from listeners.

The Second Great Awakening (1800-1850)
The Second Great Awakening spread out to the Western frontier and helped spur growth among Methodist and Baptist congregations. As people spread out from the east coast to the frontier, new ways of evangelizing developed. Preachers traveled to distant places preaching and teaching the gospel of salvation to pioneer families, often located near smaller towns. In some places, large gatherings of people, called Camp Meetings, met for days at a time to hear preachers and socialize with friends. Not only did this provide a source of entertainment for lonely pioneer people, but many found faith through the faithful preaching of the gospel. Charles Finney (1792-1875) wrote about how to bring about revival, which inspired innovations in outreach. Along with evangelizing thousands of new believers, the awakening influenced the growth of reform movements, such as abolition, temperance, and women’s rights. The Second Awakening also resulted in the founding of numerous colleges and universities by Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Methodists, and Baptists.

The Third Great Awakening (1850-1900)
Not always recognized, the Third Great Awakening took place in the second
half of the 1800s. While not directly connected, the awakening is seen in the work of the YMCA, the Civil War, and the Businessmen’s Revival.

The Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA-founded 1844) helped cultivate revival in 1857-1858 through discipleship of young men. A financial panic hit Americans in 1857 as banks failed, factories shut down, and railroads fell into bankruptcy. Prayer meetings among businessmen in New York led to widespread revival there and in other cities. Sometimes called the Businessman’s Revival, it is estimated that one million people became Christians as a result of this revival.

The Civil War (1860-1865) drew men from frontier towns into military service, which resulted in corrupt and immoral activities and actions among many. Church leaders observed a lack of morals among men during and after the war, which fostered a wave of concern. Evangelistic revivals during the Civil War found some 200,000 soldiers receiving Christ. Following the war, they took a fresh spirit of outreach back to their homes and towns.

As in previous revivals, new denominations (e.g., The Salvation Army came to the USA in 1888) and leaders arose. Evangelist Dwight Moody came of age during this period and became the lead figure in a long line of well-known revivalists who followed in his wake, such as Wilbur Chapman (1859-1918) and Billy Sunday (1862-1935).

**The Fourth Great Awakening (1950-1990)**

It is still debated, but it appears a new religious awakening occurred beginning in the mid to late 1900s. Before and after World War Two, a new wave of interest in evangelism burst forth in the USA. This resulted in numerous organizations, methods, and strategies for evangelism. “The array of evangelistic plans, especially over the last fifty years [1946-1996], has been dizzying: Ambassadors for Christ, Project Philip, Youth for Christ, Navigators, InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, Campus Crusade for Christ, Athletes in Action, Fellowship of Christian Athletes, Here’s Life America, Jews for Jesus, and many other endeavors that are sponsored by individual denominations” (Salter, Darius, 1996, p. 118). It is to this period of time I now turn.

**A Closer Look at Contemporary Evangelism**

Many different methods, organizations, and approaches to evangelism appeared by the end of the twentieth century. While there is overlap among them, the following are of note.

**Crusade Evangelism (1950s)**

This approach to evangelism was no recent innovation. The American
frontier in the 18th and 19th centuries brought out thousands at a time to hear such great orators and preachers of the gospel as John Wesley, George Whitefield, Charles Finney, Dwight L. Moody, and Billy Sunday. Vast crowds gathered for evangelistic revivals in large church buildings, in town squares, in open fields outside of cities and towns, and in camp meetings miles into the wilderness.

Billy Graham (1918-2018) ushered in a new age of revival evangelism with his 1947 crusade in Los Angeles. He innovated the staging of large evangelistic campaigns, usually in the thousands, through the involvement and support of local leaders and churches. Cooperative evangelism relied on the involvement of multiple denominations. Graham encouraged the involvement of all ethnic groups, as well as Roman Catholics. This approach to evangelism continues today in the Harvest Crusade ministry of Greg Laurie.

Student Evangelism
Young Life (1941) and Youth for Christ (1944) are two well-known evangelistic ministries targeting middle school and high school students. In the beginning, Youth for Christ used large gatherings, similar to evangelistic revivals, called Saturday Night Rallies. Counselors used the Roman Road to lead students to Christ. In contrast to large rallies, Young Life directed energies toward building personal relationships with students, often leading students to Christ at Christian camps throughout the year.

Campus Evangelism (Cru and Navigators 1950s)

Campus Crusade for Christ (1951)
Campus Crusade for Christ (now known as Cru) was founded at the University of Los Angeles by Bill and Vonette Bright. Both had been influenced by Henrietta Mears at the First Presbyterian Church of Hollywood, CA. Mears was nationally known as a Christian educator and a designer of Sunday school curriculum and teacher training materials. She also taught the college class, whereby she led hundreds of college students to Christ using a method she learned from her mother (who probably learned it from Mear’s grandmother). Under her influence, the Brights caught a vision for evangelizing university and college students.

The Navigators (1951)
The Navigators ministry was started in 1933 by Dawson Trotman, but the campus ministry came into view in 1951 at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. A major focus of the Navigator ministry was military personnel,
and it stressed small-group and personal one-to-one discipleship.

**Memorized Presentations (1940)**

*The Romans Road (1948-49)*

The use of memorized presentations became popular in 1948-1949 when a pastor in East Texas, Jack Hyles, came up with a useable plan for people to share the gospel—*The Romans Road* (Hyles, 1970). He took verses from Paul’s Epistle to the Romans to show people how to come to faith. He originally used Romans 3:10, 3:23, 5:12, and 5:8. The use of this method became popular and is still in wide use today.

*Steps to Peace with God Booklet (1954)*

During the 1954 London Crusade, Charlie Riggs, director of counseling and follow-up for the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association (BGEA), developed four steps and titled them *Steps to Peace with God*. The booklet is a key part of training counselors for crusades sponsored by the BGEA. “Riggs saw *Steps to Peace with God* as a natural overflow from the message Billy Graham preached. The challenge was how to translate that message into a tool that the counseling and follow-up team could use in training volunteers who prayed with inquirers at the end of a Crusade meeting” (BGEA Staff, 2023).

*Four Spiritual Laws (1960s)*

In 1965 the *Four Spiritual Laws* booklet was published to help Campus Crusade for Christ staff lead college students to Christ. The roots of the booklet began in the late 1950s when Bill Bright (1921-2003) decided that “the movement needed a standardized evangelistic tool that staff could use in their witnessing” (Quebedeaux, 1979). He first wrote a presentation titled “God’s Plan for Your Life,” which was Crusade’s first how-to material. By the early 1960s, it was found that an even shorter version was needed. Thus, the *Four Spiritual Laws* was written.

According to one of Mear’s biographers, Bright adapted the evangelism methodology of his mentor, Henrietta Mears to explain the fundamentals of salvation (Leyda, 2023). The *Four Spiritual Laws* became a widely used booklet for evangelism training in the last half-century. Numerous adaptations were created by individuals and denominations.

*Bridge to Life (1950s?)*

An exact date is not known when or how the *Bridge to Life* approach was created, but the Navigator booklet presentation—*The Bridge to Life*—has become a widely used method of evangelism. It has been adopted by numerous individuals, churches, and organizations as their primary tool.
for sharing the gospel of salvation with others.

**Saturation Evangelism (1960s)**

In 1961 Missionary Kenneth Strachan experimented with an approach to evangelism that tried to mobilize all of the resources of a church for comprehensive witness to the world. The approach became known as *Evangelism in Depth* (Strachan, 1961). In the USA his approach became known as *Saturation Evangelism* and was defined by Jerry Falwell as the preaching of the gospel to every available person at every available time by every available means (Falwell and Towns, 1973). Campus Crusade’s “Here’s Life” evangelistic campaign (also known as “I Found It”) of the 1970s was a type of saturation evangelism, as are many local churches’ attempts to reach their village, town, or city for Christ. The recent “He Gets Us” media blitz is a type of saturation evangelism still employed as a strategy today.

**Evangelism Explosion (1970s)**

Evangelism Explosion trains lay Christians to effectively tell others about Jesus and the good news that heaven is a free gift that cannot be earned or deserved (Kennedy, 1970). It teaches a clear outline of the gospel message which can be explained in a short summary or a two-hour discussion. Trainees learn a simple outline, how to engage non-Christians in conversation, and key apologetic answers to questions that are asked most often. It uses a warm call approach of visiting people in their homes, but only after they have shown some receptivity by first visiting the church. It also relies on the ministry of conversation more than booklets or written literature.

**Seeker Evangelism (1970s)**

A new approach to evangelism arose with innovative church planters in the 1970s and 1980s. Willow Creek Community Church’s founding pastor, Bill Hybels, and Saddleback Church’s founding pastor, Rick Warren, pioneered a new form of church that focused attention on the unchurched. Sunday morning church services were re-engineered to appeal to non-churched people. This approach spotlighted a social-cultural analysis of a church’s community and the people who resided within it. Ministry was adapted to the needs, desires, and expectations of the non-churched. While not using the term seeker-sensitive, the originator of this approach was Robert Schuller, founder of the Crystal Cathedral (originally Garden Grove Community Church) in Garden Grove, CA (Hybels and Hybels, 1995; Warren, 1995; Schuller, 1975).
Relational *Oikos* Evangelism (1980s)

Oikos is the Greek word translated as “house” or “household.” It refers to one's entire estate, people, and property forming one family or household. In biblical times it included not only one’s spouse and children, but also extended family, servants, foreigners, and associates. Thus, relational evangelism refers to the preaching of the gospel over the natural networks of relationships, friendships, and associates. Other names often used for a relational approach are network evangelism, friendship evangelism, and incarnational evangelism.


**Power Evangelism (1986)**

Power evangelism was an approach to evangelism promoted by John Wimber, founder of the Vineyard Church movement. It was based on a Pentecostal theological perspective and depended upon a demonstration of God’s power through signs and wonders as a means of evangelizing people. Spiritual gifts, such as words of knowledge, prophecy, and deliverance, were key to this type of evangelistic outreach. The approach was explained in *Power Evangelism* (1986) by John Wimber and Kevin Springer. The book sold over one million copies but was not well accepted outside of Pentecostal churches.

**Servant Evangelism (1990s)**

Servant evangelism is a simple, straightforward approach to sharing God’s love in simple, practical ways. It often involved church members serving their community in practical ways, such as sweeping a street, painting a house, picking up trash, and other down-to-earth ways of demonstrating care for others. *Conspiracy of Kindness: A Refreshing Approach to Sharing the Love of Jesus with Others* (1993) by Steve Sjogren helped make this evangelistic approach popular.
Missional Evangelism (2000s)
Missional evangelism defines evangelism as an invitation into the Kingdom of God. It involves getting to know someone well enough to see where the Kingdom is seen and needed in their lives. In other words, where is God’s presence visible in a person to bring redemption, healing, renewal, and transformation through his or her submission to God’s reign? Is there a brokenness, an injustice, or a relationship that needs to be submitted to God’s reign? In practice this means, for example, if a friend gives evidence of concern for the poor, one might invite them to help serve a Thanksgiving meal to the poor in the community along with Christians. As unbelievers serve together with believers, they hear stories of faith, ask questions, probe for insights, and in time come to faith in Christ. The Celtic Way of Evangelism (2000) by George G. Hunter, III, is an expression of this approach.

Summary
With the rise of multiple cultural groups, as well as the identification of numerous personal needs, it is common today to find churches using multiple methods to communicate the gospel of salvation. Observation discovers countless churches engaging in a wide range of ministry programs to connect the gospel to others, including Celebrate Recovery, financial management seminars, Bible studies, missional activities, sports teams, lay witness training, social action, and many other programs and activities.

What Have We Learned?
This brief overview of the various approaches to evangelism that arose during the last half of the twentieth century gives testimony to the innovativeness of Christ’s Church (and churches). The following are a few insights.

First, Christ’s church is innovative. The various means, approaches, and techniques observed in the last half-century point out the reality of the Holy Spirit’s active work in bringing forth new ways to preach the gospel. It is thus to be expected that newer approaches will be born in the coming years.

Second, new approaches to evangelism rise up every ten to twenty years. For example, today we are seeing new approaches, such as 3 Circles, developed by Jimmy Scroggins, a Southern Baptist pastor, that has gained wide popularity. Others include Training for Trainers (T4T) "Why, Whom, How?", 411 Disciple Making Training, He Gets Us, Jesus Is (blank), Do vs. Done, and The Morality Ladder. More innovation is coming.
Third, every new method works somewhere, but not everywhere. Memorized presentations assumed that people could be led to Christ in a few minutes. This may have been true in the middle of the last century, as people in general had enough familiarity with Christianity’s core story to make a quick decision. However, as people have become more secular, we have to begin further back in the process, and it takes extended conversations before people believe. As one example of this, I was told by a member of Cru that back in the late 1960s and early 1970s, it was common for a staff member to share the *Four Spiritual Laws* with fifty or more students a week, leading a number of them to faith. But around the turn of the century, it was common to share the *Four Laws* with less than fifteen students a week, with few coming to faith. Evangelism Explosion’s memorized outline worked best with unbelievers who were formally educated and enjoyed verbal discussion. It did not work as well among those with less verbal skill. The Navigator’s *Bridge to Life* seems to work well with unbelievers who are visual learners, while not as well with those who are less visual. Similarly, Friendship evangelism approaches work best where people have large networks of family or friends or associates with whom they can share their faith. Thus, relational approaches tend to work well with younger people and in newer churches, while not as well in older churches with older members (who tend to have fewer relational connections).

Fourth, packaged approaches to evangelism have a lifespan of about fifteen years, after which they have decreasing popularity and results. As an example, I vividly recall the excitement of attending an Evangelism Explosion training event in 1975 with over a thousand others. While Evangelism Explosion training is still available, it does not attract the same interest as it did when it was new.

Fifth, churches that are successful evangelistically use multiple methods and approaches. While a larger church may focus on services for seekers, they also offer small groups around topics of interest to the non-churched, such as financial management, and provide outreach ministry to those with various addictions. The wide variety of interests, concerns, and passions found among unchurched people demand churches use multiple approaches rather than just one.

Sixth, as each new approach becomes visible, denominations and associations of churches innovate to develop their own culturally appropriate clones. Multiple versions of the *Four Spiritual Laws* and the *Bridge to Life* are easily found, as are adaptations of friendship evangelism and *Evangelism Explosion*. This is to be expected in the future.

Seventh, it is generally held today that most churches in America need revival, renovation, restoration, or resurrection. Whatever word one uses,
one of the evidences that true revival is taking place is when the gospel of salvation is preached, particularly by the whole church, including lay persons. McGavran noted, “Revival implants Christ’s Spirit in men and forthwith they, like their Master, make bringing salvation to men a chief purpose of their lives” (McGavran, 1970, p. 169). McGavran reminds us, “Remember, after the day of Pentecost occurred and 3000 people were baptized and received the Holy Spirit, there were not just 12 apostles preaching, but 3000 Christians preaching” (McGavran and Arn, 1974, p. 20). Thus, fresh innovation in evangelism is needed, particularly innovation that involves motivating, training, and deploying lay persons to share the gospel of salvation with others.

**Conclusion**

While we face challenging barriers to the preaching of the gospel, it is true that God has often used the worst of times to do his greatest work. We hold that evangelism—the proclamation of the Gospel of Christ—is the force that can change the world. Let’s pray that God will use our time to discover new innovative approaches from the Holy Spirit to faithfully and fruitfully reach thousands, yes, millions for Jesus Christ in the coming years.

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https://billygraham.org.uk/p/london-birthplace-of-the-steps-to-peace-with-god/


[The story of Bill Bright adapting Mears’ evangelistic method into the *Four Spiritual Laws* was shared in a personal conversation between Leyda and the author.]


About the Author
Gary L. McIntosh is Distinguished Affiliate Professor of Christian Ministry & Leadership at Talbot School of Theology, Biola University. A prolific author, his most recent book is The Solo Pastor: Understanding and Overcoming the Challenges of Leading a Church Alone (Baker Publishing, 2023). He may be reached at cgnet@earthlink.net.