



**March 20, 2008**

## **ETHICAL EVANGELISM**

“Relevance” and “contextualization” are the two buzz words in evangelism circles today.

Relevance is the term that is employed when referring to effectiveness. In today’s evangelism world, if one is not effective in reaching lost people then they are said to be no longer relevant or irrelevant.

In its simplest form, contextualization refers to communicating the Gospel message in terms that are appropriate and understandable to one’s audience. For example, I would expect those who teach our church’s empty-nesters to present the Gospel differently than those who teach our third graders. I preach differently in our seminary chapels, where the audience knows theological terminology, than I do at inner city missions in Houston.

A significant number of churches today make almost all their ministry decisions and plans based on contextualization and relevance. I believe much good has come from discussions related to these two issues. I also believe much harm is done to the Kingdom in the name of contextualization and relevance.

For example, if relevance deals with a church’s effectiveness, what is the measuring stick of effectiveness? Numerical attendance? If so, then that church will pursue almost any program/ministry/approach/style that will get ever growing numbers of people in the door. As the numbers come in, that church will deem itself “relevant” in reaching today’s lost culture.

However, this line of thinking also has to consider the churches that aren’t drawing huge crowds to be “irrelevant.” This is a dangerous line of thinking.

Take John 6 for example. Jesus feeds arguably 20,000 people. That is quite a sizeable attendance and is comparable to the biggest churches in America today.

However, in the same chapter, Jesus says to His audience, “He who eats of My flesh and drinks of My blood abides in Me and I in Him” (John 6:56). In a culture that considered blood religiously unclean, the audience quickly rejected Christ’s message and grumbled and argued over the sermon before leaving altogether. Jesus turned to the twelve disciples who were left and asked them if they were going to leave also.

In one sermon, Jesus Christ’s numerical attendance shrunk from 20,000 to 12. Must we conclude that

Jesus' ministry was "irrelevant"? Rather, we are better left to conclude that relevance cannot be measured by numerical attendance.

Yet, in today's church culture, numerical attendance is everything. An American church is considered relevant when there are lots of bodies in the worship center and irrelevant when there are not. This logic has led the American church down a road I have come to believe is damaging the Kingdom. But before I explain what I mean, let me briefly discuss contextualization.

If contextualization is communicating the Gospel to an audience in a way that they can understand it, how does one evaluate how competent they are at contextualization? If I stand in front of 2,000 people and present the Gospel, how do I know if I what I said was clear to them?

Ironically, the *de facto* measuring stick of contextualization by American churches is numerical results.

Often, someone who receives a sizeable numerical response when presenting the Gospel is considered a leader in the contextualization of the Gospel. But such thinking is problematic.

If contextualization is to be measured by numerical results, then eventually and inevitably the content of the Gospel message will get edited and censored to cause more people to "respond". The biblical standard of salvation will adjust downward, and that is what I believe we are seeing in American churches today.

The Gospel is often presented as an equitable contract between the lost person and God. "If you will turn to Jesus, He will be your friend." "If you will invite Jesus into your heart, He will provide for you." "If you will trust Jesus, He will watch over you." We sell the Gospel to people based on what they will get from God in this lifetime which in turn means their motive for turning to Christ is the impending blessings God wants to pour into their lives.

American churches have walked themselves into the buzz saw of numerical-results-driven ministry. Misguided measuring sticks are driving the discussions of relevance and contextualization, and American churches are in troubled waters.

What we need is a wakeup call. We are doing much damage to the Kingdom of God. We are telling people who have not reached the biblical standard of salvation that they are saved. We are telling lost people, whom we have pronounced redeemed, that they can be decision making members within our congregations. We are leading people, who have no intention of making personal sacrifices for the sake of the Kingdom, to believe they are in good standing with God. We are baptizing people who have no intention of choosing the Lord Jesus' will over their own will when inevitable conflicts arise between them and God.

In short, we have reached a day in American churches where we have given ourselves the authority to adjust the biblical standard of salvation, and we are reaping what we have sown.

Prayer meetings are empty. Churches are doing well if they can get 20% of their members to share their faith during the week. Sacrificial service in the church is on the list of spiritual extinction. Americans willing to die for the faith are a rare breed.

Personal safety on mission trips is of more importance to church members than getting the Gospel to lost people. In Southern Baptist life, the International Mission Board has more money set aside to fund new missionaries than we have missionary candidates in the pipeline.

Nasty church conflict is now the norm. Pastors are preaching sermons initiated by requests from their congregation instead of the time they spend on their face before God. Our already dwindling baptism numbers are padded by churches that count individuals who are baptized for the second and third time. Based on what I have seen in American churches today, it appears that few realize how troubled times are in the lives of our congregations. Most of the churches that do recognize the problem are trying to “program” their way to a healthier state.

However, the problem cannot be fixed through leadership style, church structure or programming. The problem can only be fixed at the point of entry into the Kingdom of God—salvation.

If we will return to the biblical standard of salvation the ship can still be righted. Our churches will regain spiritual health. The people in our churches will desire the Lordship of Christ. They will hunger for the Word of God. They will serve sacrificially. Many more will sell all they have and move to places like Yemen as missionaries. They will share their faith. They will see the effectiveness of prayer. We will see genuine life change.

American churches, including mine, need to return to the biblical standard of salvation.

Jesus’ provides the standard of salvation in His sermon recorded in Luke 14:25-35. The premise of the passage is that a decision as significant as becoming a follower of Christ should not be made without first considering the cost involved. The decision should not be made emotionally or frivolously, but with serious consideration given to the price that one might have to pay for the sake of the Kingdom.

In verses 28-30, Jesus provides the illustration of how foolish it would be to begin a large construction project without first ensuring one can financially and logistically support the work that has to be done.

In verses 31-32, Jesus provides the illustration of the foolishness of going to war without first ensuring one has the resources and personnel to win the fight. His point is that in much the same way, it is foolish to rush into a decision to become a follower of Christ without first counting the cost.

In verses 26 and 33, Jesus provides examples of the types of sacrifices that may be required of a believer: family, one’s own life, and one’s possessions. A follower of Christ needs to understand that the day could come that for the good of the Kingdom, one’s relationship with their family, one’s possessions, and even one’s own life may have to be sacrificed.

Jesus clearly says that if one is not willing to pay that kind of price, then they are not ready to be saved. The fact that the passage sounds hard to us reveals how far we have lowered the bar of the standard of salvation.

Christ preached this sermon to LOST people. While in their lost state they were to consider the price to be paid and if they were unwilling to pay such a price, they were not ready to be saved.

Jesus also modeled this kind of evangelism for us in Luke 18:18 with the story of the Rich Young Ruler. The ruler approached Jesus and asked what it would take for him to inherit eternal life. Jesus called on him to demonstrate his readiness for salvation by selling all he owned and then by giving away the money he made on the sales.

When the lost man indicated his reluctance to make such a personal sacrifice, Christ deemed him unready for salvation. Obviously, from the first day in one’s walk with Christ, Jesus expects a willingness for the believer to pay the ultimate price, if called upon to do so, for the sake of the Kingdom. This expectation is unfathomable to us in American churches because we have changed the

standard of salvation.

Yet, Jesus' example is the biblical standard of salvation. This is the standard a New Testament church must maintain in her efforts to win the lost. We must kindly, firmly, and urgently call the lost world to this standard of salvation. We must do everything we can to help lost people move to this point in their lives.

We must teach, counsel, encourage, rebuke, urge, beg, and plead as much as we have to in order to give every lost person we can the opportunity for salvation. In other words, we will do everything we can to present clearly the bar, but we will not lower the bar.

Perhaps this is how American churches arrived in our predicament in the first place. Through our love for lost people and our desire to see them saved, we started lowering the bar to accommodate their unwillingness to come to Christ on His terms.

It is time for our churches to put the bar back where it belongs and focus our attention on leading people to the standard. Will a church's numerical numbers go down? Probably. Will there be fewer baptisms? Probably. Might pastors receive criticism by the lost members of their congregation? Definitely. Will they be told they are too hard on lost people? Probably. Will lots of visitors filter through their churches and end up going to visit the churches down the road that have lowered the bar? Probably. But, will any of this ever shrink their church from 20,000 to 12 in one sermon? Unlikely.

Its time for American churches to return to what I call ethical evangelism.

First, we must maintain the biblical standard of salvation regardless of perceived relevance or context. For to lower the standard is to disobey the Lord's commission to the church.

Second, we must stop telling people who fall short of the standard that they are saved. Let our churches be forthright in our message so that the lost may know where they stand before God that they might receive the opportunity for true salvation.

If churches are effective in ethical evangelism, then the numbers will seem irrelevant.

---

## **EASTER AND THE GREATEST GIFT TO JESUS**

This weekend is Easter and with juxtaposed feelings I am looking forward to it. On the one hand, I can't believe Jesus died because of me. My heart breaks that He who knew no sin became sin on our behalf. Tragic. On the other hand, I can't believe I get to go to Heaven because Jesus paved the way through His death, burial and resurrection. Amazing. Easter is always an emotionally exhausting time for me in my walk with the Lord.

No doubt, the highlight of this weekend, for me, will be the Greatest Gift to Jesus Offering. What better way to celebrate the death, burial, and resurrection than to take up this one time offering, over and above our tithe, to have more money to tell the world the Easter story, the Gospel message, the Good News of Jesus Christ. This offering is about putting Bibles in the hands of people in various countries of the world who don't have one. This offering is about opening doors in spiritually hard places for missionaries to tell the Good News. For example, we have missionaries in desert regions who will install a water well for a remote village. That presence of a clean and dependable water source right in their village transforms their way of life and gives our missionaries the platform to gather the entire village and share the Gospel with them. This offering is about buying copies of the Jesus Film and projectors

for showing the film so that illiterate villages around the world can learn of the Good News in their language.

This offering requires sacrifice on all of our parts. It requires us to go without so that the Kingdom can have. I'm not just asking you to give out of your abundance, I'm asking you to go without so that the Kingdom can advance. How will they hear with a preacher? We have to provide the money for them to get the Gospel.




---

## SE TEXAS MISSION TRIP RECAP

I'm so proud of our team that just returned this week from assisting Hurricane Rita victims in the southeast corner of Texas. We partnered with Faith Family Baptist Church to go and do what we do best—do whatever it takes to have the opportunity to tell people about Jesus. Our team represented our church so well. Here is a recap:

- 68 people from NEHBC and FFBC participated in this trip. The eldest member of the team was 81 years old!
  - The team worked on six homes that required major demolition and re-construction.
  - It is a safe estimate that in three full days of labor, the team worked nearly 1400 man hours.
  - Loaded up 100 cubic yards of construction debris – that is 4 huge construction dumpsters (2) 20 cubic yarders and (2) 30 cubic yarders.
  - Sheet-rocked, taped and floated an entire house to get ready for painting and got started on another one, doing one room and all the ceilings.
  - Leveled one house – the guys on this job had the nastiest conditions of all to deal with crawling around under that house with spiders, snakes and sludge/waste, leveled part of another one – and not one of them complained.
  - Reconstructed an exterior wall to a home after a demolition crew before us, and installed siding on the front and side of the house.
  - Spent a day and a half demolishing most of the roof and interior of a house to prepare for rebuilding – got floor and ceiling joists reinstalled and new walls built, covered the work in tarps to prepare for next construction team.
  - Built a handicap accessible ramp on a house for an 84-year-old widow and painted her home.
  - Finished painting the home and storage shed for an elderly couple
  - Consumed over 25 cases of water, lots of snacks and plenty of bubble gum 😊.
  - Had several opportunities to explain to people why we were doing this out of love for Jesus, to pray with them and share the Gospel.
-

## **TEENAGERS**

It is Spring Break and this week, under Pastor Wes' leadership, the teens have been busy studying the Word of God and making memories. Each day this week, they are gathering at NEHBC at 1pm for Bible Study. Then at 2pm the memory making begins. They've played glow-in-the-dark miniature golf. They've been bowling. They've gone to the Woodlands to play laser tag. They've consumed an unquantifiable amount of food. Oh, did I mention they went door-to-door to 1,160 homes to invite people to one of our Easter services? I love our teens. Spending regular time in the Word and doing personal evangelism over their Spring Break. I'm so proud of them. I pray for them often. I hope you do also.