

Saving Souls In The 21st Century

Franklin Church of Christ
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PM Worship

Introduction:

What do you do after finishing Thanksgiving dinner? (Nap.) Why? Because you are full. On the other hand, what do you do on days when you skipped lunch, worked late, picked up junior at scouts, took him to baseball, got stuck in traffic and finally got home at 11:30? (Find something to eat.) Why? Because you are hungry. Satiation and satisfaction lull us to sleep. But hunger motivates us to move (**Proverbs 16:26**). I am hungry right now. No, I am not looking for food. I am hungry to do God's will and save souls (cf. **John 4:34-38**). Right now, while we sit in our comfortable worship hall, lost people abound all over Franklin and middle Tennessee. We run into them every day, at work, in our neighborhoods, at the bank and the mall. We must not be satisfied just to let them stay lost. We must not be lulled to sleep while another soul still needs saving. I want some baptisms. I want more growing Christians. Do you want that too? If you do, then allow me to share with you what we have to do. We will begin by examining the history of soul saving over the last 100 years. Then we will note three lessons from that history to help us satisfy our hunger to save the lost.

Discussion:

- I. Saving souls between 1900-1960 (**Acts 17:21**).
 - A. Because society was more rural and people did not travel as far to worship with a church, there were more churches. However, there were fewer preachers. Therefore, many churches made use of circuit preachers, trying to make the most use out of them for short intervals. This led to using the Gospel meetings that are so famous.
 - B. This form of evangelism was well-suited to the times. After working all day, most people did not have much to do in the evenings. People would attend the meetings, no matter how they felt about the church.
 - C. The success in this evangelism was due largely to the fact that even though the preacher might make everyone mad on the first night, the people would come back. They had nothing "better" to do. This was much like Paul's success in **Acts 17:21-34**. The people had nothing better to do than talk about new things. Thus, Paul was able to teach and some obeyed. By the end of a meeting, the guests had heard about Biblical authority, the one church, worshipping in spirit and in truth, the plan of salvation, heaven, hell and judgment. It was not unheard of to have 20 baptisms or more during a Gospel meeting.
 - D. One major change took place in the 1950's, bringing success in soul saving through Gospel meetings to a stumbling halt. The success of television gave people something to do. People who were going to be successful soul savers had to learn a new approach.
- II. Saving souls between 1960-1980 (**Acts 20:20**).
 - A. In the 1960's, those who were hungry did what it took to save souls and discovered another successful method which again fit the times: cottage meetings or one-on-one home studies. Much like Paul did in Ephesus according to **Acts 20:20**, they taught from house to house.
 - B. According to my friend and student of church growth, Harold Comer, cold call, door-knocking has never averaged more than about one convert out of every 1000 visited. However, if the soul saver had personal contact already and took some time to assess the level of spiritual need and desire in his contact, then about half the people he invited to have a home study would agree.
 - C. At this time, people found great success using film-strips and 10 lesson plans. Approximately half of those who agreed to study would complete the series. So, one out of every four offers to study would result in a person completing the study. Many of these would not be converted right away. However, of those who completed the study about 70% would become Christians within five years due to continued contact with good Christians. Thus, the soul saver who qualified his contacts well would extend 40 invitations for home studies, 20 would agree, 10 would finish, and within 5 years, 7 would be converted—many without seeing the inside of the church building.
- III. Saving souls from 1980 to the present (**I Corinthians 14:24; Acts 20:20**).
 - A. However, in the last 23 years, society has changed even more. First, longer work hours, more social activities and more time-consuming entertainment venues have made people busier.

Most are unwilling to agree to lengthy series because of time constraints. Secondly, televangelists and cult groups have made folks skeptical of those who want to study the Bible.

- B. Because of this skepticism and busyness, many Christians believe people are just not interested in spiritual things. However, there are people who know they have spiritual needs. We just have to work harder to find them. Consider how ungodly Rome was, yet, soul savers had success in Rome. So, now we have to learn new methods of successful evangelism.
- C. Those who are really hungry to save souls will find new methods. Today, the method which seems to be working the best is the contact meeting, a combination of the two previous methods. Meetings and worship services play an important role in evangelism today. However, people are rarely converted through those assemblies. Instead, they are contacted through them. They like what they see, so they return. As trust and relationships are built through repeated visits, the soul saver invites the prospect to have a study. Then the teaching house to house begins.
- D. Here are the averages, based on church growth and evangelism studies. Out of every 20 recommendations or invitations, 1 will accept. That one will likely bring someone with them. About 2 out of 10 visitors you invite to study will eventually accept the offer. The ratio I have observed over the past couple of years is half of those with whom we study will be converted. That means if we offer 100 recommendations or invitations, we will get 10 visitors, 1 of which will become a Christian.

IV. What does this mean for us?

- A. We need to be recommending and inviting.
 - 1. By recommending, I mean following the example of the woman at the well in **John 4:29**. She told people about what Jesus had done, encouraging them to check it out. By inviting, I mean following the example of Philip with Nathanael in **John 1:46**, saying a simple, "Come and see." Make your recommendations and invitations simple. Do not scare your prospects by overwhelming them. Just let them know they will be missing out on something exciting and great if they do not check us out.
 - 2. Harold Comer does workshops on evangelism and church growth all over the country. Every where he goes, he asks Christians about how many recommendations they offer in a year. The average is four or five. Remember it takes 100 invitations to find one convert. At that rate, it would take a person 20-25 years to find one person who will be converted. No wonder so few churches are growing.
 - 3. Based on the averages, if each of us made just two recommendations or invitations every week, we would double the size of this congregation in one year. By the way, because people learn more in Bible classes, if we make our Bible classes great and focus our recommendations on them, the conversion ratios double.
- B. We must be more guest-oriented in our assemblies.
 - 1. Our worship services are not about our guests. They are not even about us, the members. They are about humbling ourselves before and worshipping the Almighty God. However, the scriptures point out our assemblies affect our guests (**I Corinthians 14:23-25**).
 - 2. There are two messages we give every guest. We give them the explicit message, that is, what is actually taught. We also give a value message, which is far more subtle. By our actions we let our guests know how valuable we believe they are and how valuable we believe what we are doing is.
 - 3. There are four factors in our value message.
 - a. *The first factor in our value message is our facilities.* Did you know that most of our guests decide whether or not they are coming back within a few minutes of arriving on the parking lot? Are our facilities kept up or run down? Are they orderly or unkempt? How we maintain the facilities affects our guest's opinion of us. If we do not keep the facility in good order, we portray a message saying our place of worship is not important to us. Therefore, our worship must not be that important either. This is a lot like visiting a restaurant. The food may be great but if the restrooms are filthy, the tables greasy and we see roaches crawling on the walls; we are not likely to go back. I am not suggesting

- we must build cathedrals to draw people to Christ. Rather, I am saying we must take care of the facilities with which God has blessed us to keep from killing prospects.
- b. *The second factor is friendliness.*
 - i. How can we convince a visitor we love them enough to save their souls if we do not love them enough to speak with them or help them find a class or a seat? When the congregation is friendly, guests feel more at home. They see a place they would like to come back to. Think of some time when you were in a crowd of unfamiliar faces. How did you feel? What could someone have said or done for you to set you more at ease? For me, this is like going to a store. In Beaumont, I frequented the hardware store that was more expensive because I could always find someone who would help me when I needed it.
 - ii. Another aspect of this friendliness is working to make the service itself guest friendly. Our guests have no idea what to expect during our service. Those involved in leading the worship need to help guests along. We must be careful of using “code language.” That is, saying things that we understand, but no one else does. For instance, preachers should not just extend invitations for people to “obey the gospel” or just asking if anyone “needs to respond to the Lord’s invitation.” We need to explain what obeying the gospel means and what the Lord’s invitation is. Finally, despite the convenience to us, our worship services should not be used as the information passing venue it has often become. We have bulletins, e-mails and phone chains with which to get information to the congregation. When we spend 5 to 10 minutes of our service talking about insider information—group meetings, get-togethers, even the sick (whom few of our guests know), guests get the idea that what we are doing is not for them at all. How do you react when you are around a group of people who are all talking and you simply have no clue what it is all about? Do you listen with interest? Do you look forward to the next time you will be together? Of course not, it is like they are some exclusive club and you are on the outside. We want our guests to feel they are on the inside and welcome to return.
 - c. *Congregational participation in worship and Bible class is the third factor.* The way we participate in worship tells our guests the value we place on worship. If we half-heartedly sing, talk during the sermon and Lord’s Supper, sleep, come in late, or in any other way show that what is going on is not important to us, then our guests will believe our worship is not that important for them either. Secondly, if we are singing “I’m Happy Today,” but look like we have been sucking on lemons, our guests will think, “Ya’ll are liars. Why should I listen to anything you have to say?” Of course, if we visit, sleep, or anything other than pay attention to the sermon, our guest will think, “Wow, the members don’t listen to what is taught, why should I?” However, if we are excited and participate whole-heartedly, our excitement and high estimation is passed on to our guests.
 - d. *The fourth factor is the preparation and excitement of those leading.* If Bible class teachers, song leaders, preachers or men serving the Lord’s Supper act as if they would rather be anywhere but here, what will our guests wish? If we who are speaking do not take time to properly prepare for the sermon or talk, our guests will be able to tell. If we who are leading the worship do not put much thought into what is going on, our guests will think, “Why should I put much thought into this?” Finally, if we do not give a motivating and convicting message, our guests will never be motivated or convicted.
 - e. We need to work on all four of these factors, being more guest oriented in them. That is not to say that we could not leave one of the factors out and not retain guests. But it makes it harder. Consider a guest who parks on our lot and sees an unkempt yard and building, the first feeling she has about us is negative. We may be friendly but if it is not enough to overcome the negative feeling the guest has, it won’t help. But if she comes in and we are not friendly, her negative feelings grow. Then the congregational participation must be really strong to make her think, “Well, even though they don’t think their place of worship is important and they don’t think I am important enough to talk to, but they do believe their worship is important, maybe I should check this out.” But if not, then the preaching and teaching must be so overwhelmingly powerful and convicting,

that despite the negative feeling our guest has, she cannot help but think, “I have to get more of that teaching.” We may be able to just focus on our teaching and our preaching and retain guests. But it is unlikely. Frankly, I am just not that good. It would be much easier if our guest drove up, saw our facility and thought, “Hey, these people care about their place of worship. Wow, they are so friendly, I feel like I am among friends here. Look at how important these people feel their worship is, maybe it should be that important to me. I am really impressed; I have never heard or learned so much Bible in one sitting as I did from this teacher or that preacher. And boy was everybody excited. This excites me too. I think I will be back next week.”

- C. We must be more careful in qualifying and developing contacts and prospects.
1. We must remember our guests are more skeptical of religion. They are not sure they can trust us. Why would we expect them to get baptized just because we said they should? Granted, we showed them a verse, but the guy at the denomination showed them another verse and said that meant they did not have to be baptized. How do they know they should believe us over him? We must take time to build relationships and trust. Let people see our honesty first. If they do not trust us, they will not learn from us.
 2. Secondly, we must recognize studying is a developmental process. It is like climbing a ladder. Nobody goes from the second rung of a ladder to the twentieth rung. Neither should we expect someone on the first step in the process to conversion to immediately jump to the last step and get baptized. We must learn to first develop a love and respect for God’s word and will in the prospect. Then, we can teach them about Biblical authority, the church, and salvation. However, many people have killed a prospect because they were not patient. They immediately went for the jugular and told them to be baptized or else they will go to hell. The prospect was not ready for that and refused to study anymore. The teacher thinks, “They just don’t care enough about God’s will. They love their will, family, friends, sins, or whatever more than God.” Perhaps the teacher is right, but what do we expect from a non-Christian? Do we expect him to love the will of God as much as we do? That is why we are teaching him, to produce love and obedience.
 3. Many people believe this type of approach is simply cowardice. Some will think I am saying that I am too afraid to say the hard things to the prospect. That is not the case. The hard things must be said. You need to have a plan to say them and then follow the plan. No matter when you say them, the prospect may turn and run. But the hard things do not have to be the first things said. Jesus recognized this concept in **John 16:12-13**. He had other things the disciples needed to know, but they were unable to bear them at that point. So, Jesus was patient and waited for a time when they could. Assessing where your prospect is and developing them gently, is a learned skill. It will come from failing sometimes and succeeding sometimes. But with each opportunity to study, with each failure, and each success, you will learn how to develop your contacts. Then you will become a more successful soul saver.

Conclusion:

We live in the 21st century. The saving gospel is the same as it was in the 1st century and in the 20th century. But our method of getting that gospel to the world needs to fit our world while following what is scripturally authorized. Allow me to ask you again; are you hungry to save souls? If so, who are you going to invite to worship with us this week? That is our first step. Then we can help our guests go to heaven with us.