



By
SIGNS
and
WONDERS

*How the Holy Spirit
Grows the Church*

Stephen D. Elliott

Foreword by **JO ANNE LYON**
General Superintendent of The Wesleyan Church

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S I G N S
and
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Foreword

Few argue that the North American Christian church is in a state of change; some would even say it is in a state of chaos or death. The statistics, the studies, the anecdotes abound. Solutions are many, but what saddens me most is that a lot of the answers are simply gimmicks with no scriptural foundation, thereby becoming a short-lived fad. We have given up of hope of seeing or experiencing the power of the Holy Spirit in this day.

Yet at the same time in North America, there is great hunger in people for something beyond themselves. There is a desire of spirituality of some type. Statements like “I love Jesus, but not the church” are a reflection of a longing for authentic Christians and the community of the church that nurtures growth.

I am deeply moved as I read Steve’s book. This is not a simple formula or a quick fix. In fact, as I write this I am even hungrier for the Holy Spirit. In *By Signs and Wonders*, he wrote, “I am convinced the North American Christian church does not lack knowledge, mission, or conviction. What Christians lack is the power to be successful witnesses. For too many years we have relied on human skill, advertising, creative programming, and human persuasiveness rather than on the impetus of the presence of God’s power.”

Steve eloquently shares his personal experience in church planting in one of the most secular cities in North America. He is transparent in sharing his experiences of failure, defeat,

and questioning. Through this he realizes in his words that “evangelism happens best in the context of both the Word being proclaimed and the works of God being demonstrated.”

I was captured as I read the stories of life and church transformation. My heart leapt. But I was even more challenged when I saw the statistical analyses through Steve’s doctoral dissertation on this subject. He found that the more open a church is to the person and work of the Holy Spirit, the more likely they are to experience miracles, and conversely, churches that do not expect miracles will not likely see them. His research is vast in this area and continually comes back to these results.

This is a great call to rediscover the work of the Holy Spirit. To realize God wants to move beyond our corporate understanding of church. Frankly, He wants to do more than we can control.

I am reminded of the words of the great mission statesman E. Stanley Jones when he said, “Pentecostalism has shied us away from Pentecost.” Steve is calling us to live Pentecost today in all of its biblical foundation! I am already seeing this fire catch in the students of Kingswood University. May it sweep through our churches and communities as we hunger and thirst for more of the Holy Spirit. We will then see in the twenty-first century the words of Paul to the Romans as he tells us how Christ accomplishes His work “by the power of signs and wonders, through the power of the Spirit of God” (15:19).

Thank you, Steve, for sounding the call!

Jo Anne Lyon
General Superintendent
The Wesleyan Church

Preface

Friendship/lifestyle evangelism: a Christian witnessing method based on the assumption that Christians consistently and intentionally living holy, loving, helpful, sacrificial, others-oriented lives, will capture the attention and respect of the unsaved, who in turn will either initiate questions about the Christian faith, or be open to a personal invitation to attend church and/or hear a presentation about the Christian faith.

Miracle: any extraordinary event caused by God that transcends any or all natural, physical, medical, or scientific laws. The list includes, but is not limited to: healings, visions, prophecy, words of knowledge, interpreting/speaking in tongues, discerning of spirits, exorcisms, raising the dead, miraculous provision and protection, divine leading and deliverance, angelic visitation, signs, wonders, manifestations, a pervasive sense of awe/conviction that “God is near,” and so on.

This is a book about evangelism and the health and vitality of the Christian church in North America. It is a book that has been seventeen years in the making, in part because I wasn’t really sure if I was ready or willing to tackle one of our most sacredly held assumptions about evangelism, and second because I am sure there are others far more qualified to address this subject than I.

Yet this is a book that needs to be written, read, and grappled with if Christianity is to rise from being an irrelevant,

archaic, and ineffective presence in the United States and Canada.

My hope in writing this book is that church leaders will take a hard look at whether friendship/lifestyle evangelism is truly an effective form of winning people to Christ. My contention is that while friendship/lifestyle evangelism is a valid and important witnessing methodology that does result in a few people coming to faith in Jesus, generally speaking it is an inadequate technique to truly impact an apathetic post- and, some would say, even pre-Christian world for good and for God. Friendship/lifestyle evangelism is not the primary method presented by the Bible for the Christianizing of the New Testament world, nor is it the historic method God has used to see entire communities converted in the great revivals of the past. The title for this book is taken from Romans 15:18–19 where the apostle Paul clearly points to the reason for his success as a proclaimer of the gospel message.

Friendship/lifestyle evangelism is a valid and necessary component of evangelism but, in my opinion, it is not nearly enough. I am not arguing in this book that believers should not be intentionally building warm, genuine relationships with their non-believing family, friends, neighbors, and coworkers, watching for opportunities to invite them to church, and opening doors to share the good news of Jesus Christ. That said, the fastest-growing denominations and local churches around the world today are far more reliant on a strategy apart from friendship/lifestyle evangelism. This is the focus of this book, to provide laity and Christian leaders with a critically important insight in how to more effectively evangelize a lost and dying world.

By
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and
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1

Ineffective and Confused

Just before Christmas 1983 I graduated from Bible college and excitedly moved to my first pastoral assignment. I was to plant a new church in the city of Kanata (a suburb of Ottawa, the capital city of Canada). The challenge to go to Kanata came from a denominational leader who had identified this community as “fast growing,” yet having a disproportionately small number of churches.

For eight months my wife, Helen, and I had been doing our research, making repeated visits to Kanata, reading everything we could find about the community that was quickly becoming known as “Silicon Valley North” (Canada’s center for high technology). Helen and I were convinced of both our calling from God and our understanding and compatibility with our new hometown. And I was not a completely inexperienced rookie.

I was a fourth-generation Christian; previously owned my own business; effectively served as a layperson in our home church; and witnessed our home church grow quickly under our senior pastor’s leadership. Over the years I traveled extensively with a variety of Christian music groups and been exposed to the ministry models of hundreds of different local

churches, in more than a dozen different denominations. I briefly served as an assistant pastor in a medium-sized urban church setting; served for three months as a chaplain in a large children's hospital; and been educated at a Bible college noted for its practical, hands-on training. I also sat under the influence of godly and effective professors who themselves had planted growing, healthy, vibrant churches.

I learned church growth and evangelism methods under an amazing professor who had required the students to take personal responsibility for introducing the gospel message into every home in designated neighborhoods. My wife and I accepted his challenge and prayerfully found creative ways to introduce lost people to the person of Jesus while in our last year at the Bible college.

I was neither afraid nor ignorant of the challenges facing the launch of our new church. And while our denomination had recently experienced numerous church-planting failures in our area, with God's help I was determined to not allow our new church to become another unfortunate statistic.

We arrived in Kanata late in December and moved into a town house near the center of the city. We knew two people who lived in the city, but they were both attending other evangelical churches, so it was truly just my wife and I launching this new church. In hindsight, it would have been much better to have planted with a team, but we did know the importance of having a strong prayer team behind us, so we recruited a large number of prayer warriors who agreed to pray either daily or weekly for us. We raised some financial support and had enough money in the bank to allow us to work full-time in this church-planting venture for at least the first year or two.

Immediately we set out to meet new people. Our very first day living in Kanata, we took homemade muffins to

our neighbors to introduce ourselves and get to know those who would be our new friends. We found a local school that was willing to rent their facilities to us for Sunday worship services, and we prepared to launch the new church by doing door-to-door surveys at the homes surrounding the school.

To this day, I am amazed at God's graciousness that allowed our early efforts to have any degree of success. There we were, planting a church in a suburb of the capital city of Canada, in the dead of winter! We recruited dozens of our friends to help us canvass the community, going from home to home every weekend, with guitars in hand, in the freezing cold, ringing doorbells and asking people if they would allow us to sing them a song (outdoors) and give them a personal invitation to visit our new church.

More than two hundred people (mainly family, friends, and financial/prayer supporters) attended our opening Saturday night event, and the next day we launched our first Sunday morning worship service with about twenty local people. I didn't know them, and they didn't know me, and they didn't know each other—we were truly strangers to one another. But we were off and running.

The Lord blessed us, and over the next five years we grew by about ten to fifteen people per year. At that point we were averaging just a little more than one hundred attendees on a typical Sunday, and we saw a number of people saved by God's transforming grace. During those first five years, a number of other evangelical churches started and failed in our community. While our results were far from spectacular by U.S. or world standards, by Canadian standards our church was a success, or at least a survival story.

Repeatedly, Christian leaders asked me what we were doing that was enabling our church to grow in an area many

would consider to be “hard ground.” Our typical response included: praying, persevering, and working hard; preaching the Word in a practical and clear manner; owning and casting an inspiring, God-given vision; providing dynamic children and youth ministries; hiring incarnational leaders who were compatible with the surrounding community; and intentionally offering culturally relevant outreach, follow-up, and discipling strategies.

Yet, I knew something was wrong . . . very wrong. While our little church had grown from two to one hundred-plus in five years, our surrounding community had grown from sixteen thousand to thirty thousand. Despite our most prayerful, creative, committed, and energetic efforts, we were not seriously or significantly impacting our community with the gospel message. We were not coming remotely close to fulfilling the vision God had given us to reach one-tenth of our community for Christ.

It was not uncommon for me to work fifty to sixty hours a week, and there were good people on our team, folks who were fully committed to the vision and task of reaching others for Christ and supporting one another in living God-pleasing lives. We had acceptable music ministries, very talented leaders in our children and youth ministries, a very workable follow-up strategy, small groups, and a strong pulpit ministry. We were doing everything we knew to do.

I continued to use every available means I could think of to reach people for Christ. Year after year, I never stopped doing door-to-door surveys. It is not an exaggeration to say I personally knocked on more than 80 percent of the doors in our community during my ministry years in Kanata. I also had a good team of laypeople who were engaged in ministries. Yet we were not impacting or reaching the community in any measure that I believed we should.

We regularly used guest speakers, film nights, outdoor concerts, need-meeting seminars, telephone blitzes, literature distribution, media evangelism, sports outreach, vacation Bible school, special theme days, and community outreach events. We were a visible presence at community days; were involved in local sports leagues; built relationships with community leaders; and held prayer walks. We organized outdoor concerts, children’s musicals, Easter events, and CPR training events; gave away hundreds of Bibles; and put on Christmas presentations annually in the local mall. We were doing everything we knew to do, yet we were not significantly impacting our community.

We wrote into the foundational document of our church that we would be “fishers of men, not keepers of gold-fish bowls.” Part of our DNA was to intentionally focus on the unsaved—we purposely did not invite people from other Christian churches to attend our church. One of our most important philosophies of ministry was to “pastor a community, not just a congregation.” We were known as a church that was not afraid of innovation or creativity. We were extremely visitor sensitive and worked hard at building a genuine sense of friendliness and community. We were doing our best to empower lay leadership and to disciple and integrate young believers into small groups, while constantly stressing the importance of outreach/service ministries.

Be fishers of men,
not keepers of
gold-fish bowls.

I studied, read books, asked for advice, and visited many of the largest churches in Canada and America. Leaders from our church and I would travel to the pastors and church-growth conferences at the leading-edge churches in America, soaking in and applying the principles and practices we were being

taught. I loved the Breaking the 200 Barrier and the “model church” conferences, and read as many church growth, health, and leadership books as I could get my hands on—Bill Hybels, Andy Stanley, Erwin McManus, and many others.

We taught personal evangelism strategies to our laypeople and encouraged friendship, lifestyle, and servant evangelism. We intentionally and repeatedly provided opportunities for our church family to invite their family and friends to church, and we encouraged them to talk about the Lord as they served others in the community. We used and supported programs such as Campus Crusade for Christ materials, the Evangelism Explosion program, the Four Spiritual Laws booklet, and even the *Wordless Book*.

We spent years studying the book of Acts in our home Bible studies, walking oh so carefully, verse by verse, through the amazing story of the launch and expansion of the Christian faith in the first century. We were serious about our discipleship and evangelism and pastoral care efforts.

We did everything we knew to help the gospel message penetrate our community, but our results were meager at best. Our most arduous, creative, prayerful, informed efforts were just not effective. We were nowhere near living up to the effective evangelism seen in the book of Acts.

I am not a quitter. I am not easily discouraged. By nature I am loyal, tenacious, tender hearted, persevering, and relational. I consider myself to be fairly well-informed . . . but after five years of church-planting efforts, I was frustrated and confused and I didn't know what to do to see our church grow, especially in the area of conversion.

Thankfully, the breakthrough came as a result of a new, in-depth Bible study I undertook. Out of sheer frustration, I decided to analyze every conversion story in the New Testament to discover what factors truly contributed to the

amazing evangelistic success of Jesus' ministry, and that of the early first-century church. The results of that study stunned me in three ways and forever changed the way I think about and approach ministry. We will discuss my discoveries in the next chapter.

— Questions to Discuss —

1. What evangelistic methods, programs, and efforts has your local church used in the last three to five years to win lost people in your community to Christ?
2. Based on what you have seen and experienced, how effective have those strategies and efforts been?
3. Given the size of your town or city, does your local church have a greater or smaller percent of people from your community attending your church than five years ago? If so, why?
4. In your most transparent moments, are you encouraged or somewhat discouraged by the results of your church's efforts to reach and retain people for Christ and His kingdom?
5. Before reading the next chapter, discuss why you think the evangelistic ministries of Jesus and the first-century church were so successful at reaching millions of people with the gospel message? What were they doing or what was true about them that is not true about the typical North American church today?

2

The Bible Study and Visit

By 1988, I was determined to figure out this evangelism thing, or die trying. Thankfully, I finally turned to God’s Word to find the answers I was so desperately seeking.

My approach was very simple. I read, studied, and wrote out every passage in the New Testament that contained phrases such as “they put their faith in him” or “they believed in him” or they “followed him”; that is, any and every New Testament passage where it recorded people surrendering their lives to Jesus as Lord and Savior. I looked at and analyzed every passage in the Gospels and the Epistles where people clearly came into a saving relationship with Jesus, trying to discover what factors were involved in those conversion stories.

I suspect that before undertaking the study, I could have identified many of the factors the Bible identified, but three completely took me off guard—and for all the wrong reasons.

The following is a summary of that study.

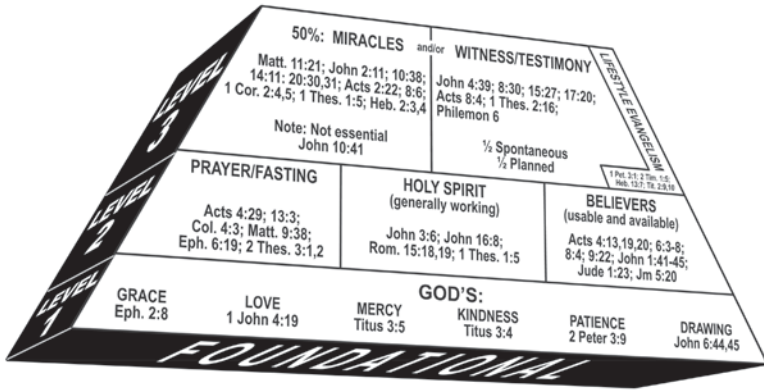


Illustration by Bim Ingersoll

Let me explain:

Level 1: Foundational to all conversion stories is the underlying mercy, love, and grace of God. Apart from Him, there would be no salvation. Apart from God's drawing influence, no one would get saved (John 16:8, 13; 6:44).

Level 2: It will come as no surprise that evangelists and missionaries (such as the apostle Paul) were repeatedly asking people to pray for them that God would open doors of opportunity (Col. 4:3), and the church responded by passionately praying for the evangelistic efforts and for the unsaved to turn to Christ. The presence and activity of the Holy Spirit in and through the lives of individuals—empowering, calling, drawing, convicting, convincing, teaching, and comforting them—was clearly a factor in the conversion stories (John 16:8). And Christ-followers were both available to and usable by God to reach the unsaved (Acts 13:2). These were the type of believers who were passionately sold out to Christ, holy in character, and willing and able to say, "Here am I. Send me!" (Isa. 6:8).

Level 3: The first of the surprise factors came at this level. I was stunned to realize that 50 percent of the conversion stories had an identifiable miracle that had just happened to, or in the plain sight of, those converted. The most obvious example is found in the story of Jesus resurrecting Lazarus, where the outcome was that “many . . . put their faith in him” (John 11:45). I recall thinking, *If I had just seen a dead man raised to life, I would have probably put my faith in Jesus as well.* Slowly I began to notice how often Jesus and the apostles repeatedly and clearly stated that the *primary* purpose of the miraculous was to encourage and nurture faith in Christ among the unsaved (John 10:38; 14:11; 20:30–31; Acts 2:22; Heb. 2:3–4, etc.). The apostle Paul in particular clearly credited the amazing evangelistic results he experienced to “the power of signs and miracles, through the power of the Spirit” (Rom. 15:19).

Fifty percent of the conversion stories had an identifiable miracle that had just happened.

Even speaking in tongues is clearly linked to evangelism, as it is “a sign . . . for unbelievers” (1 Cor. 14:22). Paul also noted the connection between prophesying to evangelism when he wrote, “If an unbeliever . . . comes in while everybody is prophesying, he will be convinced by all that he is a sinner and . . . will fall down and worship God, exclaiming, ‘God is really among you!’” (1 Cor. 14:24–25).

Please understand that neither observing nor personally experiencing a miracle is essential to the conversion process (John 10:41–42); neither is the presence of a miracle a guarantee people will believe in Jesus (Neh. 9:16–17; Matt. 11:20–24; 12:13–14; John 12:37; 15:24). But at least 50 percent of the New Testament conversions stories do

contain an identifiable miraculous event that obviously accomplished its intended purposes of drawing a crowd; breaking apathy and indifference; affirming the existence of God; and propelling faith in Jesus and His gospel (John 10:38; 14:11; Acts 2:22; 14:3; 1 Thess. 1:5; Heb. 2:4; 1 Cor. 2:5; Rom. 15:19). For some reason I had never previously noticed the clear connection the Bible makes between the role of miracles and the conversion process.

A. W. Tozer identified a number of ways the Holy Spirit impacts evangelism efforts. He pointed out that the manifest, immanent presence of the Holy Spirit usually results in:

- a. A sudden brilliant consciousness of God's presence, and a heightened awareness of an "other-worldly" reality.
- b. A new sense of spiritually seeing, feeling, and hearing that comes on people, creating wonder, awe, holy fear, and amazement.
- c. A boldness, authority, and power in preaching, which convicts, penetrates, and commands respect and attention.¹

The last *significant* factor was one I could have predicted, but it was important for me to see. The conversion accounts in Scripture include someone verbally sharing a concise presentation of the gospel message. No evangelism methodology is complete without someone communicating (verbally or digitally) Jesus' offer to save people from the penalty and power of sin through His shed blood on the cross. At some point, someone has to open his or her mouth and tell others the good news. While there are a growing number of contemporary stories of God revealing Himself to Muslims through dreams and visions, the vast majority of unsaved people come to faith in Christ as a result of someone clearly and passionately sharing the gospel message with them.

What particularly caught my attention was that 50 percent of the verbal presentations were intentional, planned evangelistic events (e.g., Paul's missionary journeys), while the other 50 percent were spontaneous, unplanned sharing opportunities (e.g., Jesus talking to the Samaritan woman at the well). Individual Christians and local churches need to be aware that God uses both approaches—intentional and serendipitous evangelism opportunities—to spread His message of redemption.

But there was one more factor, a final but tiny factor, that truly stunned me, not for what I discovered, but for what I didn't see: friendship evangelism! References to friendship/lifestyle evangelism as a significant factor in conversion stories were rarely found. I cannot fully communicate how much this missing factor stunned me.

There is almost no biblical evidence that friendship/lifestyle evangelism was a significant factor in the evangelistic results of Jesus, the apostles, or the first-century church. In closely analyzing the biblical accounts of people coming to faith in Jesus, it became apparent that the vast majority of those who were being converted did not personally know the speaker, and they knew few (if any) Christians. For instance, Paul came into Ephesus (Acts 19:8), persuasively shared the gospel, and people got saved. Yet the people of Ephesus had no idea whether Paul's lifestyle and character, or any other believer's, actually supported that gospel message. The people in that community didn't know Paul, or any other Christian. It is unlikely that the apostles' lifestyle and friendships were a significant factor in people coming to faith in Jesus.

To be absolutely transparent in the writing of this book, I need to say that there are a few instances where friendship/lifestyle evangelism did play a role in the conversion of a person. Most notably, Titus 2:10 encourages servants

to make sure their actions make the gospel attractive to unbelievers; and 1 Peter 3:1 talks about the positive influence that the godly attitude and lifestyle of a saved wife will have upon her unsaved husband. These two passages are perhaps the clearest biblical examples of the impact believers' attitudes and lifestyle can and do have on the eternal destiny of the unsaved around them.

So, by friendship/lifestyle evangelism, I mean consistently, intentionally living a godly, loving, others-oriented lifestyle, believing it will open up opportunities to talk to people about Jesus or invite them to our gospel-preaching churches. The premise of friendship/lifestyle evangelism is that holy, others-oriented living somehow captures the interest of the unsaved and inclines them to ask questions about our faith. Those who promote friendship/lifestyle evangelism claim it will spark a desire in the lost to investigate the claims and person of Jesus, and/or incline them to accept our invitations to come to church. And in fairness, some unsaved people do find the lifestyles of believers to be compelling evidence for the legitimacy of the gospel message.

Proponents of friendship/lifestyle evangelism point to the biblical stories of the friends who brought the lame man to Jesus (Mark 2:3), or to Philip or the Samaritan woman inviting friends, family members, and neighbors to meet Jesus (John 1:45; 4:29). These stories are paraded frequently as examples of why friendship evangelism is so important and so effective. And no one would argue that living a caring, holy, compassionate, other-oriented lifestyle is not important. Of course it is.

However, upon closer inspection in most of these stories, the people inviting or taking others to encounter Jesus *had first witnessed, experienced, or at least heard of some miraculous activity associated with Jesus*. The *reason* people excitedly brought friends and family to encounter Jesus was because

they were first *personally impacted* by the profound wisdom (words) and power (works) of Jesus (Matt. 4:24; 7:29; 9:8, 33–36; 12:15; 13:54; 15:30).

If Jesus had not shared supernatural insights about her past, would the Samaritan woman have hurried off and invited the entire town to come meet Him? I think not. If Jesus had not previously healed others, would the four men in Luke 5:17–18 have brought their paralyzed friend to Him? If the heavens had not opened, revealing the voice of God and the Holy Spirit descending on Jesus in the form of a dove during His baptism, and if the fishermen had not miraculously caught a netful of fish in response to Jesus' instruction, would Andrew have run to get his brother Peter to meet Jesus (John 1:40–41)? Would the community have excitedly talked about Jesus over and over again if He had not raised a ruler's daughter from the dead (Matt. 9:25–26)?

This is *not* to minimize the words and message of Jesus, nor to downplay His lifestyle or character. My great fear in writing this chapter is that some will go beyond what I am saying, thinking I am minimizing the person, character, and message of Jesus. The Bible does record that people were clearly impressed and compelled by both who He was and what He said (Matt. 13:53–54). It would be no exaggeration to conclude that if we could have sat at the feet of Jesus to physically hear what and how powerfully He spoke, we would be spellbound (Luke 4:20; 19:48; 24:19). Those who heard Jesus teach were “amazed” at His wisdom, graciousness, boldness, insightfulness, and authority (Matt. 7:28–29; Luke 4:22, 32).

It is true that *some* people were first attracted to Jesus because they wanted to hear what He had to say. They found Jesus' message to be persuasive, all on its own (John 8:30), totally apart from the convincing effect of the miracles. But on close analysis of the Scriptures, we discover it was usually

the miracles that *first* attracted the crowds (Matt. 4:24; 8:16; 14:14, 35; 15:30, et al.). Once people came to see Jesus in action, they most often stayed, enthralled by both the power of His life and the wisdom and relevance of His message (Matt. 7:28). But don't miss the obvious: the reason the vast majority of people came to hear and see Jesus was because they were intrigued by the stories of His incredible power over nature and disease.

The story of Jesus healing the two blind men truly encapsulates this. As a direct result of Jesus' healing ministry to them, the Bible says, "they went out and spread the news about him all over that region" (Matt. 9:31). Similarly, when Jesus raised the young boy back to life, Luke wrote, "This news about Jesus spread throughout Judea and the surrounding country" (Luke 7:17). Time after time, people shared passionately and frequently about Jesus to their neighbors, family, coworkers, and friends, because they had first had a miraculous encounter with Jesus. I wonder if the majority of people in Jesus' day would have been enthusiastic about inviting their family to come meet Jesus had there not been any miracles. We can't say for sure one way or the other, but what we can say is that the Bible is clear that Jesus' miraculous ministries were a significant reason why huge crowds came to see and hear Him, and why they invited others to come and experience for themselves this miracle worker.

Yet today, when churches either minimize or discourage the supernatural manifestations of God and the person and work of the Holy Spirit, we strangely expect those in our congregations to be excited about inviting their family and friends to church to meet Jesus. The lack of emphasis on the miraculous is like tying one of our hands behind our back. By doing so, the church is robbed of its natural ally in evangelism. Yet somehow we have concluded that friendly, godly, but

dispassionate Christians will somehow magically and enthusiastically draw the unsaved into a relationship with Christ.

I believe friendship/lifestyle evangelism is not overly effective because our contemporary churches are often missing the most important reasons *why* the first-century Christians so passionately and effectively evangelized. The impetus and excitement that compelled New Testament believers to share their faith, the power that propelled the early church forward, and the force that persuaded nonbelievers to believe are all but absent from our churches.

The church has become anemic in its evangelistic efforts because of our fearful de-emphasis on the person and work of the Holy Spirit.

Let me hasten to say here that my entire life I have attended and served in Wesleyan (Methodist) churches and institutions. I do not consider myself a charismatic. Those who know me would be hard-pressed to call me an emotionally driven individual. I like structure and creeds and predictability. I believe I am about as orthodox and conservative as they come. But I am convinced the church has become anemic in its evangelistic efforts because of our fearful de-emphasis on the person and work of the Holy Spirit.

Consider the following observations from noted church health and growth consultant Gary McIntosh:

Mark records that following one of Jesus' miracles, the "news about Him went out everywhere into all the surrounding district" (Mark 1:28). The word translated "news" can also be "reported" or "rumor." Today we'd say "word of mouth." Jesus' ministry was predominantly communicated by word of mouth. After Jesus raised a dead man, Luke records that "this report concerning Him went out all over Judea, and in all the surrounding district" (Luke 7:17).²

Apart from Christians being internally excited by their own life-transforming encounters with God, they are rarely motivated to share the faith or invite others to church.

I sometimes question if many Christians today are truly, fully persuaded to believe. I wonder how many Christians have lingering doubts about their faith—in part because they see such little evidence of the power of God in their own lives and through the church. Could it be that the reason friendship/lifestyle evangelism has such a poor track record is because many Christians are not fully convinced and thus not excited to share their faith? Consider what would happen if the church reengaged with the powerful ally we have in the Holy Spirit to persuade Christians (and a lost world) of the power of the gospel to liberate and redeem. Biblically, historically, and presently around the world, whenever and wherever the Holy Spirit is visibly and powerfully working, Christians become passionate ambassadors for Christ and the unsaved find the message of Christ's church to be persuasive.

Based on my own research, only about 1 percent of the conversion stories in the New Testament can be primarily attributed to the impact of friendship/lifestyle evangelism, whereas 99 percent of the conversion stories are due to the combination of the other five factors in the diagram on page 12: prayer, the Holy Spirit, usable/available believers, miracles, and powerful/passionate witnessing.

This stunning realization contradicts most books written on the topic of evangelism today. According to my latest research, almost all the evangelism methods being printed and promoted today in North America have, at their core, a heavy stress upon friendship/lifestyle evangelism methodology. Since the 1960s, authors such as Win and Charles Arn, Joseph Aldrich, Robert Logan, Bill Hybels, and many others (all of whom I highly respect and deeply admire) have

emphasized friendship evangelism as *the* “effective way” of evangelizing.³

A recent Google search of the topic of friendship/lifestyle evangelism reveals more than 2 million websites and articles primarily promoting or at least talking about this methodology. A quick perusing of the evangelism books online and in local Christian bookstores reveal that almost 100 percent of the books available today singularly promote this methodology. Researcher George Barna and Pauline Chang have concluded that 83 percent of all North American Christians believe in and *solely* use friendship/lifestyle evangelism.⁴ Yet the biblical support for this approach is almost nonexistent!

Anecdotally, people will point to the conversion of so-and-so as an example of a person converted due to the influence of a godly parent, or to the personal invitation to come to church by a caring Christian friend or family member. It is true that statistically nine out of every ten visitors who come to a church, do so as a result of a personal invitation.⁵ I do not deny these stories or statistics; rather, I applaud each and every one of those victories.

Yet the church seems strangely oblivious to the fact that while lifestyle evangelism contributes to a few conversions each year, this approach has little to no impact on hundreds of thousands of people heading toward a lost eternity. The church is only analyzing and applauding pitiful evangelistic efforts, not pursuing what can or should be. This is a bit like saying, “Two people came to Christ as a result of us mailing out 100,000 invitations to the community.” While we are thankful to the Lord for the two, the reality is that for 99,998

Eighty-three percent of all North American Christians believe in and *solely* use friendship/lifestyle evangelism.

others, the mailing was totally ineffective. To continue to heavily emphasize and promote a methodology that has very little biblical support and which experientially has such poor results, is folly.

Presently, almost 50 percent of all churches in North America see no conversions per year,⁶ and according to a study by the Church of the Nazarene, even those churches that do win people to Christ are primarily reaching those who are biologically related or close friends of people in the church; rarely are they seeing people come to faith in Christ who have little to no relational connection to the church.⁷

Although Barna reports that 52 percent of Christians shared their faith with nonbelievers in 2013,⁸ I struggle to believe this stat is even remotely close to true. Dr. Ron Johnson (well-known professor of evangelism, author and denominational official with the Southern Baptists) recently shared with me in a series of e-mails that based on his research of five thousand Baptist churches and his more recent observations, leads him to believe that something closer to 2 to 3 percent of Baptists typically share their faith each year.⁹ The 2001 edition of *Operation World* noted that approximately 2 percent of North American Christians regularly share their faith, and the most recent 2010 edition of the book claimed that evangelism in North America is an “alien activity.”¹⁰ Author Thom Rainer wrote that only 2 percent of American Christians invite an unchurched person to attend church each year.¹¹ Sadly, only about 5 percent of Christians will ever in their lifetime lead another person to the Lord.¹² In recent history, churches have been closing three to four times faster than churches are being planted (although some recent evidence indicates we are beginning to turn that stat around). The percent of those in our communities who are regularly attending weekly church services is dramatically decreasing

(typically only about 12 percent) with a stunning 47 percent of Canadians “never” attending any church service in the course of a year.¹³

How we are promoting and propagating the gospel message simply is not working, or at least not working very well.

Additionally, our Christian influence on young adults in general, and on young males in particular, continues to fall dramatically. The stats on the church’s declining influence among men and young adults are totally disheartening.¹⁴ In most churches the percent of women who attend Sunday services versus men is approaching two to one (61 percent versus 39 percent), and at midweek services/Bible studies the stats fall

Only about 5 percent of Christians will ever in their lifetime lead another person to the Lord.

to 75 percent versus 25 percent.¹⁵ One researcher recently noted that approximately 6 million married women in the United States will attend church on any given Sunday without their husbands. And the likelihood of the young boys who presently attend our churches, continuing to attend once they reach adulthood is sobering: more than 70 percent leave the church, and most never return to regular attendance.¹⁶ In the absence of persuasive evidence that our message is true and powerful, the gospel message is falling on deaf ears and we are badly losing ground, especially in our efforts to reach men and young adults.

The explosive growth of cults and other world religions in North America has been an embarrassment to the Christian church. The reality is that people *are* spiritually hungry, but they are not finding the message of the church convincing. The accepted numbers declare that 80 percent of North American churches are plateaued or declining in attendance, and of

the remaining 20 percent, 19 percent are growing primarily because of the transfer of believers between churches or the birth of babies! Only 1 percent or less of North American churches are truly growing due to conversions!¹⁷

Put another way, the *vast majority* of churches are either plateaued, declining, or only growing due to transfers and/or the addition of babies. One Canadian study concluded that 90 percent of the growth in churches could primarily be accounted for by the circulation of saints between local churches.¹⁸

How the North American church is doing church is not working. I clearly point the finger of blame at the inattention we have given to the person and work of the Holy Spirit. Using our current evangelistic methods, statistically it presently takes eighty-five believers, working together for one year, to win one person to Christ. As Barna said, “much of evangelism fails to result in conversions.”¹⁹ Can you imagine what would have happened to the Christian faith in the first century if the church had relied on friendship evangelism as their preferred and primary methodology to advance the gospel? There would be no Christian church in the world today.

Recently I was present when some full-time, cross-cultural missionaries gave their reports about their overseas efforts. These missionaries had been trained in lifestyle evangelism and were using a variety of other strategies (such as English as a second language teaching opportunities) to build relationships with nationals. Over the last five years they had not seen one person come to faith in Christ. My objective in sharing this story is not to be critical or hurtful, for I used the same methodology repeatedly in the earliest years of ministry, and experienced the same meager results. But now I ask, When will we acknowledge that this soft sell relational strategy is just not effective?

The minimal results the church has experienced over the last twenty to thirty years screams out that friendship/lifestyle evangelism is not an effective methodology, especially within the context of a post- or pre-Christian society. One highly respected evangelist recently told me that one reason friendship evangelism tends to not work is that after investing themselves relationally in building bridges to their unsaved neighbors, Christians will often become reluctant or even unwilling to share the gospel because “they simply value the relationship too much and are afraid that the bridge isn’t strong enough to support the weight of the gospel.”²⁰

In my opinion, the experiment has been an utter failure. The emphasis on winning people to the Lord through relational Christianity has been unwise and significantly lacking in biblical support. Apart from the person and work of the Holy Spirit, we are getting pitiful results based on what human effort and creativity can generate. At best, our present methodologies would qualify as “pre-evangelism” efforts.

This biblical insight has caused me to wonder how I, and so many others, could have been so wrong. It is true that living a godly life helps substantiate the Christian message, and that living an inconsistent, irresponsible, or even sinful life will undermine the Christian message. And yes, the Bible does say that the true evidence of a person’s conversion is the presence of God’s love in and through him (John 13:35). But only in a couple of places, mentioned earlier, does the Bible say that the way a Christian lives may have a drawing or persuasive influence on the unsaved. Furthermore, the oft-quoted “Bible verse” used to validate the importance of lifestyle evangelism (“see how they love one another”) isn’t even a Bible verse. It is a quote from Tertullian.²¹

Advocates for friendship/lifestyle evangelism periodically point to stories from Eusebius of Caesarea (263–339), who

recounted instances of the loving care provided by Christians to the hungry and diseased, as evidence of the impact of exemplary living.²² Reason does not follow that just because something catches our attention, it also has a life-changing impact upon us. Sometimes I wonder if we have falsely concluded that anything noteworthy and interesting must also be persuasive. People may notice that Christians act and speak differently, but this does not necessarily lead others to conversion.

As I have stated previously, one of my apprehensions in writing this book is the anticipation that some will conclude I am minimizing the need for Christ's church to be fostering a "community of caring and winsome individuals who care about the community at large and serve their neighbors and the least of these around them."²³ Let me be clear. Christians should be loving and caring; we ought to be the first and the most sacrificial in helping to alleviate pain and suffering, addressing and resisting injustice and social ills, and proactively reaching out as a redemptive influence for good and for God in our communities and world. But we need to be realistic and careful how much we anticipate this contributing to evangelistic success.

Some time ago, I witnessed a local Jehovah's Witness congregation completely erect a place of worship in just one weekend. Their dedication, work ethic, sacrifice, and organization were impressive, but their praiseworthy efforts did not have any power to persuade me to become a Jehovah's Witness. Similarly, the dedication of Mormons as they go door-to-door sharing their faith on cold winter days is notable, but this does not entice me to become a Mormon. The sacrifice made by Muslims to support their fellow Muslims who are recovering from natural disasters, while impressive, does not incline me to become a Muslim.

A few weeks ago, a friend of mine commented on the frequent kindness and amazing servant-heartedness of some of his family members who are committed Buddhists. Yet despite the multitude of compassionate services they provide to others, their noteworthy efforts do nothing to persuade their family members to become Buddhist! Nor should we conclude that the sacrificial, others-oriented, and godly lifestyles of Christians have a significant converting influence on the unsaved.

The truth of the matter is the lifestyle of the earliest Christians was not a significant factor in advancing the Christian faith in the first century. As stated earlier, for the most part people were converted to the Christian faith without any real knowledge of whether the apostles' lifestyle backed up the claims of the gospel. Some other factor(s), then—not the kind, holy, helpful, generous, friendly practices of Christians—was truly propelling the gospel message.

The Conference

Soon after completing my biblical study of the five major factors that account for every conversion story in the New Testament, I heard about a conference in Edmonton, Alberta, that was going to highlight the connection between miracles and evangelism. I quickly registered and made plans to attend. Upon my arrival, I discovered I was in the midst of a very large gathering of like-minded believers.²⁴ I had no idea who John Wimber, the main speaker, was. My initial impression was that Wimber was humble, warm, authentic, wise, insightful, and God-usable. Although I knew absolutely no one at the conference, speakers or attendees, I felt that I had discovered kindred spirits and that they had found the missing ingredient and the key to healthy, vital, growing church ministries.

There were some aspects of Wimber's teachings I found awkward to accept; nevertheless, I was impressed with his approach to healings, words of knowledge, and prophecies. In my mind, his way of thinking and approach to ministry aligned much more

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with the matter-of-fact, everyday approach I see in Jesus' ministry, than with the hype and production of more well-known, contemporary, televangelist-type healers. The Lord had already allowed Wimber to lead hundreds of people into a saving relationship with Jesus Christ.²⁵

In his book *Power Evangelism*,²⁶ Wimber contended that evangelism is most potent when the proclamation of the Word is substantiated by the supernatural demonstration of the power of the Holy Spirit. I was intrigued. Wimber put into print the exact same conclusion I had just reached in my own Bible study. At the conclusion of the conference I knew I needed to read and study much more about this approach to evangelism that emphasizes both proclamation and demonstration, because truly, evangelism works best when it combines word and deed: verbalization of the gospel message and visualization of the power and presence of God.

— Questions to Discuss —

1. Were you surprised by the fact that more than 99 percent of the conversion stories in the New Testament have little to nothing to do with lifestyle or friendship evangelism? Before reading this chapter, what factors would you have thought contributed to people coming to the place of surrender to Jesus as Lord and Savior?

2. If your unsaved family members or neighbors witnessed or experienced a legitimate, verifiable miraculous event, do you think that event would capture their attention or incline them to reconsider the claims of the Bible and the gospel message?
3. Have you or anyone you know experienced any type of miraculous/supernatural event in your life that contributed to you coming to put your faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior?
4. George Barna indicated that something close to 52 percent of Christians share the gospel message with an unsaved family member or friend each year. Most other studies, however, indicate the number is closer to 1 or 2 percent. Excluding pulpit or small-group presentations of the gospel message, which percent seems more accurate to you? Why do you think this number is so small?
5. Most churches are rapidly losing both men and young adults from the church. Is that true in your local setting? If so, why? This may be due in part to the powerless nature of the Christian church. Do you agree or disagree?
6. Statistically, only about 1 percent of Christian churches in North America are growing due to conversion growth. The vast majority of growth in most churches is due to the birth of babies and/or the transfer of Christians from another church. Is that true in your local church?
7. Does the self-sacrificing, committed, serious relationship a Mormon, Muslim, or Buddhist has with his or her faith incline you to become a Mormon, Muslim, or Buddhist? If not, why do we think that a Christian living a committed Christian life will have a persuasive impact on his or her family or friends?