

Evangelism Evolution: How My Understanding Has Changed Over Three Decades

by Larry Hovis, CBFNC Executive Coordinator

Though the word, in its present form, doesn't appear in the Bible, evangelism is an important subject for Christians — and Baptists in particular. Its root from the Greek, *euangelion*, is in the Scriptures, and simply means “good news.” In fact, it appears in Jesus' inaugural sermon, recorded in Luke 4:18-19, taken from Isaiah:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news (euangelion) to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”

If evangelism, bringing good news, is central to Jesus' self-understanding of his mission, then surely it must be central to the mission of his followers, right? Most Baptists would agree. But what is evangelism? Looking back over my own adult Christian pilgrimage, I can see an evolution of my understanding of evangelism, particularly at five key points along the way.

Scene 1 - Respectful Skepticism

It is 1980. I am a freshman in college. I live on a hall-style dorm with no air conditioning. Long before the advent of iPods or even walkmans, every student in my dorm has his own “personal listening device.” It's called a stereo, has huge speakers, and blasts music that can be heard by everyone in a three-mile radius. The anthem for my hallmates seems to be, “I'm gonna rock 'n roll all night, and party every day.” Beer flows freely (drinking age is eighteen) and partying is the most popular pastime, especially in the early days of the semester before tests, papers and projects pile up.

A group of guys makes regular rounds in the dorm. Behind their backs, they are ridiculed as the “God Squad.” They visit each room, even those containing the most inebriated students, confronting them of their need to repent of their sin and turn to Christ. They find few receptive ears. I admire their commitment to the Lord and their passion for their cause, but I question their methods.

Scene 2 – Finding My Own Voice

It is 1985. I'm now a first-year seminary student, part of a leadership team taking a group of college students from North Carolina on a spring break mission trip to Panama City Beach, Florida. We're working with a home missionary, a single woman named Vada. There is still an entity called the “Home Mission Board,” with a large department called “Christian Social Ministries.” Vada has dedicated herself to ministry with the poor of the community. She loves Jesus and the people but is pretty tough and intimidates the students (including me). *Star Wars* is a popu-

lar movie, and the students quietly refer to her as “Darth Vada.”

One day, we're helping distribute clothing to the neighborhood. Vada calls me over. “You're in seminary, right? This is Jane. Share the Gospel with her.”

I'm confused. “You mean right here? Right now?”

“Where else and when else?” Vada responds rather matter-of-factly and walks away, leaving Jane in my care.

So, Jane and I sit down on the edge of a porch. We engage in a little small talk. Finally I make a feeble attempt to walk Jane down the Roman Road and share the plan of salvation. She voices a prayer to accept Jesus. Whether she's done this before or this is the first time, I don't know. I also don't know whether this makes any difference in Jane's life. What I do know is that it changes me.

Scene 3 – From Evangelism to Church Growth

I'm now a pastor. Through sermons, newsletter articles, and other platforms, I regularly encourage congregants to be witnesses. Usually, this translates as “invite your neighbors, friends and co-workers to our church.” A few of them actually do it. Of the new folks who come, a minority of them have never made a public commitment to Christ. I share with them the meaning of salvation, baptism and church membership, and lead them to become part of the body of Christ. I become quite comfortable in this role, as the primary evangelist of our congregation. It makes me feel important. It's how we add new members to the church. But I'm not sure it's good that we've equated (or reduced) evangelism to church growth.

Scene 4 – Vision for CBFNC

It's 2004. I've just begun a new ministry as CBFNC Coordinator. I'm traveling around the state conducting regional meetings, meeting people, sharing my vision for CBFNC and soliciting ideas from those who come. One of the dreams, I say, is to emphasize evangelism in our fellowship. In subsequent years, we form an Evangelism Task Force consisting of congregational leaders and CBF field personnel who are passionate about evangelism. They spend time defining evangelism and identifying resources that will help congregations pursue evangelism with greater intentionality and effectiveness. We also focus the 2009 CBFNC General Assembly on evangelism and enlist Fred Craddock, one of the greatest Gospel proclaimers of our time, as our keynote speaker.

Scene 5 – A New Perspective

I'm sitting in the large ballroom of the Westin Hotel in Charlotte at the 2010 national CBF general assembly. Alan Roxborough, one of the “gurus” of the missional church conversation, is speaking at the leadership institute. He challenges us to “move back into our neighborhoods.” That is, as Christians and church leaders, we should focus on our neighbors – those who live where



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CBFNC Foundational Statements to be Discussed in Regional Meetings

Larry Hovis, CBFNC Executive Coordinator

When CBFNC leaders first engaged in strategic planning in the early days of CBFNC life, foundational statements related to identity, mission, values, principles, virtues and method were adopted. Though not duplicated verbatim, many of these statements were based on similar statements developed by CBF National. Since that time, many of the national statements have been revised.

When CBFNC leaders engaged in strategic planning in 2007, it was determined that our foundational statements should be studied, revised and updated if needed. The Coordinating Council appointed a task force to address this need consisting of: Don Gordon (Durham), Curtis Freeman (Durham), Larry Harper (Raleigh), Ken Massey (Greensboro), and Gail Coulter (chair, Hendersonville). Larry Hovis and Rick Jordan assisted the task force.

The task force has been at work since 2008 and developed proposed revisions that were presented to the Coordinating Council in January 2010 for information and feedback. The task force led a ministry workshop at the 2010 General Assembly in Winston-Salem to explain the process, share the proposed revisions, and solicit feedback from participants. They then determined to hold regional meetings around the state in the fall to share the proposed statements, receive feedback, and generate discussions around the statements and the ideas they represent.

The schedule for these midday meetings is found in the box to the left. All interested persons are welcome to attend. Because some of these meetings involve meals, reservations are required. Registration information and full details can be found at www.CBFNC.org.

September 7 – Forest Hills, Raleigh

September 9 – Golden Corral, Durham
(as part of the monthly regional fellowship gathering)

September 13 – FBC Ahoskie

September 16 – FBC Greensboro

October 14 – Pritchard Memorial, Charlotte

October 19 – FBC Bladenboro

November 1 – FBC Asheville
(following the monthly regional fellowship gathering)

Bea and the Village of Hope children



It is My prayer

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It is my hope that next summer churches throughout North Carolina will encourage their youth to join teams to go to the Village of Hope. There are a total of 24 children living at the Village and more to come as soon as Laurel's House is completed. The Reverend Gladchenko works with orphanages and will welcome young people

to join him in projects at an orphanage. There is a great opportunity for young people to help in summer camps at the Village. Last year, more than 300 children attended the camps. The Bucha Baptist Church conducts Bible School at the Village, and our children are participants. More than 60 children attended this summer.

There is still much work to be done. Michael Gluschenko is working with the architects and anticipating the start of construction on the medical center next summer.

God has called us to the Village, and He is truly blessing this work. It is my prayer that our NC churches will renew their commitment and enthusiasm to see this Village completed so that many more children will be able to come to live in a loving Christian home and grow up to be happy, productive citizens.

For more information on going or giving, contact Bill Mason at (704) 233-4645 or wmason@carolina.rr.com.

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we live and those who surround our church properties. Rather than driving past our neighbors and those who live near our churches – so that we can worship, fellowship and minister with others who have made journeys past their neighbors – we should invest our lives in our neighborhoods and discover opportunities to share the Gospel, in word and deed, in ways that are natural, authentic, and life-giving.

What Roxborough says makes sense, but it scares me. I'd much rather be a critic of faulty evangelistic approaches, or practice evangelism with strangers from hundreds (or even thousands) of miles away, or serve as the "professional" evangelist in my role as pastor, or attend meetings where we discuss evangelism. But to develop authentic relationships in the suburban neighborhood where I live would require a radical change in my lifestyle.

What about you? Where do you stand in relationship to evangelism? What role does evangelism play in your congregation? What would happen to you, to your church, to our CBFNC community, if we took Roxborough's challenge seriously? What would it mean for us to really follow Jesus command to "love our neighbors?"