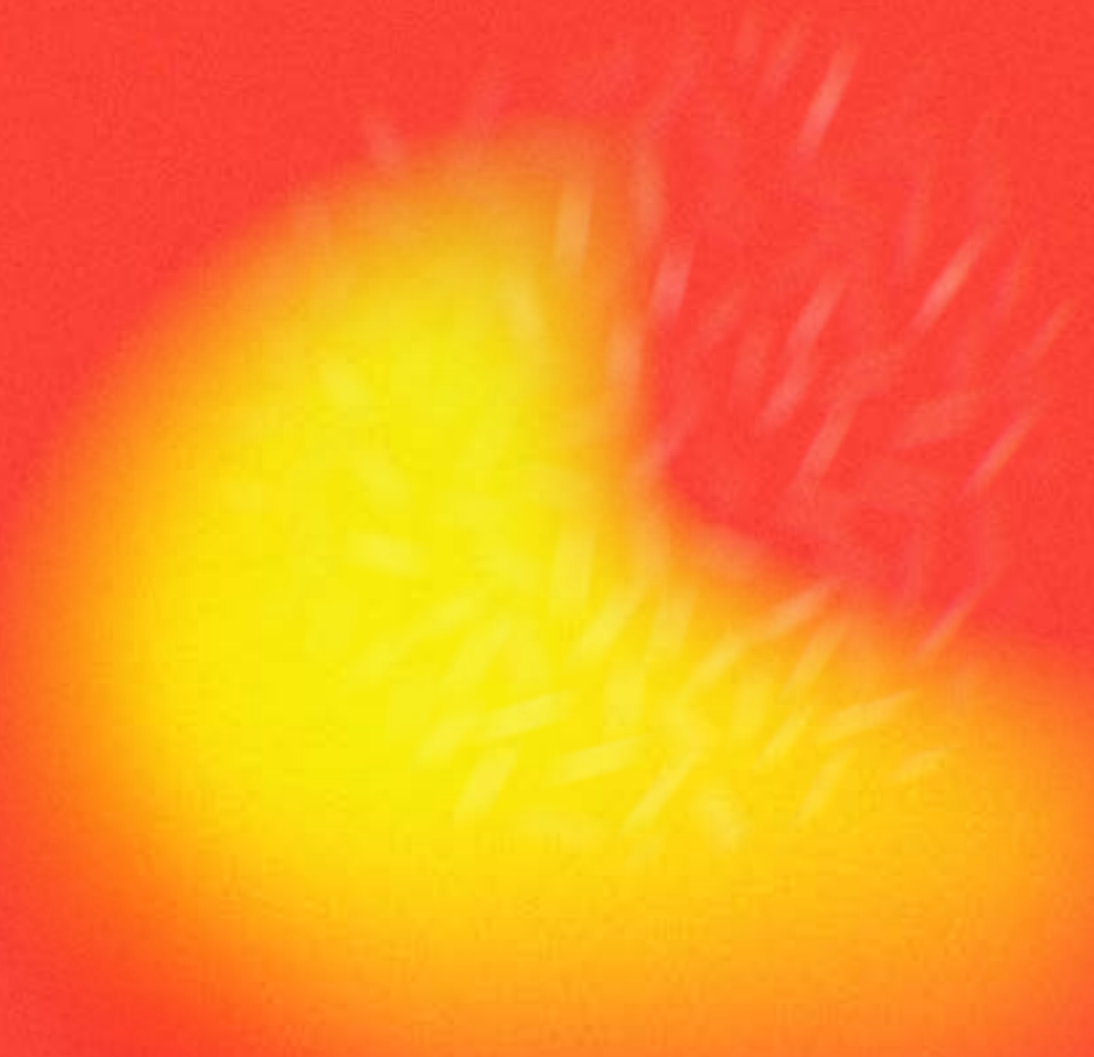


Revitalizing Evangelism

Dave Ferguson
Rick Richardson



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REVITALIZING EVANGELISM

by Dave Ferguson and Rick Richardson

THE LOST CAUSE: JESUS' PERSONAL MISSION

Why are we still trying?

That's the question some of us are asking right now. Why are we still trying to evangelize? Doesn't it feel like a lost cause, even a hopeless one?

Today's world is difficult to navigate. We're clearly living in a post-Christian era. The assumptions and views of our world are not Christian values. Growing up in Chicago, that wasn't even true when I (Dave) was a kid. If you have ever thought that Christianity was the common worldview in the past, it's certainly not that way now.

Our society sees evangelism as culturally inappropriate. Even many Christians think evangelism is wrong. A Barna Research study found that nearly half (47%) of Millennials practicing Christianity say it's wrong to evangelize.¹

In some ways, making evangelism a priority in our churches feels very hopeless, like maybe it's time to wave the white flag and surrender. It really does seem like evangelism is a lost cause.

THE LUKE 19:10 MISSION

As church leaders, we know that's not an option to give up on evangelism because *to give up on the cause is to give up on the mission of Jesus*. In Luke 19:10, Jesus clearly and succinctly tells us why he was sent:

For the Son of Man came to seek and save the lost.

Jesus leaves no room for interpretation. He doesn't speak in metaphors or parables. He wants us to have no trouble understanding his personal mission. God doesn't see the world as a lost cause. He is relentlessly committed to restoring a broken relationship with each of us. That's why he sent his son.

When I think about Jesus' words in Luke 19:10 and then spend time looking at his life and teaching in the Gospels, I realize just how relentless, how unstoppable, his commitment to the lost really is. Jesus actually came down to earth as a human to become one of us. Philippians 2:6 says that he **“did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but he became human.”** Not only a human, but the lowest of the low. He became a servant who

made the ultimate sacrifice by dying on a cross and taking on the past, present and future sins of the world. Jesus' parables also show us his relentlessness. In Luke 10, he tells three stories: the lost coin, the lost sheep and the lost (prodigal) son. Each one gives us a beautiful illustration and narrative of his passion to seek and save the lost. Even in his teaching, Jesus shows us that he won't leave the one behind.

Then, I think about the very last thing Jesus says before he leaves Earth: "Go into all the world and make disciples" (Matthew 28:18-20). He gives the Church the challenge to do what he lived out and taught and invites us to adopt his personal mission as our own. Our commitment to the lost cause should be just as passionate and personal.

I (Rick) didn't grow up in the Church. I was connected to the Unitarian church through my parents and then a liberal mainline church. Although I loved some of the good things they were doing for people, it was spiritually empty. At the core of it was a bankruptcy that I felt deeply, an emptiness, a lack of purpose, a lack of anything ultimate. When I found Christ in college, I realized all that emptiness, the lack of purpose, the connection to anything bigger I had felt was filled with Christ. I live with an urgency of wanting to see that happen for everybody because that's what happened in my life.

We've all had that "prodigal son" experience—of finding ourselves in a far, far off place, not at all where we ever expected or wanted, and then finally coming to our senses and groveling our way back home. Somewhere along the way, whether it was in grand or small ways, the Father showed up with arms open wide. As followers of Jesus, we are called to be his witnesses so that everyone can experience that homecoming both on earth and in Heaven.

My (Dave) dad tells a story about my grandmother and great-grandfather who weren't believers. A neighbor of theirs walked across the street and actually invited them to church. My grandfather was a carpenter, a man's man. The church pastor was a guy he could relate to, and his example, as well as his neighbor's, made an impression on my grandfather. He continued to come back and take his family with him. Dad was about 12 years old. That encounter changed the trajectory of both his family and mine as well.

To experience God's unconditional love and feel his arms wrapped around us—that's the personal and relentless love Jesus wants for all creation. When we begin to see that our own story and other people's stories are very much the same, then we begin to be passionate about seeing others turn to God.

Evangelism is core to the personal mission of Jesus. It's essential to accomplishing his vision.

JESUS' VISION FOR HIS CHURCH

If you've been connected with Exponential for a while, you'll be familiar with Jesus' multiplication vision in Acts 1:8:

"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

Jesus gives us this beautiful vision of what he dreams for the Church. A movement of witnesses—reproducing from Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, to the ends of the earth. It's this movement that accomplishes his Luke 19:10 mission.

For us to see a world-changing movement like this, we need every person in the Church to wholeheartedly buy into and adopt Jesus' personal mission: to seek and save the lost. Evangelism is core to the personal mission of Jesus. It's essential to accomplishing his vision.

That's what Rick Richardson and I are enthusiastically talking about in this series of five workbooks. In this series, *The Lost Cause*, we'll be talking about what it takes to create a culture of evangelism in our

churches and ultimately a reproducing movement of churches focused on Jesus' vision. We've broken this conversation up into five workbooks that focus on five specific areas vital to developing a culture of evangelism in our churches. They include:

1. The Lost Cause:
Jesus' personal mission
2. The Lost Cause:
The biblical values of evangelism
3. The Lost Cause:
The stories of evangelism
4. The Lost Cause:
The behaviors of evangelism
5. The Lost Cause:
A movement of evangelism

A church with a culture of evangelism will hold the biblical values of evangelism, share the compelling narratives and stories of evangelism, live out the behaviors of an evangelistic church that plants churches that plant churches with an evangelism DNA.

Throughout this series, you'll hear from both of us. As a church leader and the leader of Exponential, I have a passion for seeing people find their way back to God—and equipping

our church and churches throughout the world to share their lives in a way that blesses others and compels them to know Jesus. Rick is my evangelism hero. He has spent his life leading and shaping this conversation through books, speaking, and leading the Billy Graham Center Institute at Wheaton College. Both of us know that you can't talk and teach about evangelism if you're not doing it yourself. So, in each workbook, we'll be sharing personal stories and examples to hopefully give you practical models.

We've also included reflection questions and plenty of room to write and take notes to help you make your own connections to this conversation. Our hope is that by the time you finish all five workbooks, you'll, like Rick says, want to focus on leading and planting churches that believe and are committed to the truth that everyone needs the relentless love of Christ.

But before we can get to that, we have to take a hard look at the reality: evangelism isn't happening today. Like it or not, the problem involves all of us. We all have to take responsibility for where we are now AND for where we need to go.

Bottom line: If we are going to fulfill the vision of Jesus (Acts 1:8), we must be about the mission of Jesus (Luke 19:10) and revive evangelism in our churches.

THE PROBLEM WITH “EVANGELISM”

When I was 19, I went through an evangelism training program. We learned how to talk about grace, man, God, Christ, faith, and then the two diagnostic questions: “Do you know for sure that you're going to be with God in Heaven?” and “If God were to ask you, ‘Why should I let you into My Heaven?’ what would you say?” My guess is you might be familiar with those incredibly leading questions.

That's how I was trained to do evangelism. Basically, I assaulted people with the gospel. I have stories where people said “yes,” and I baptized them that night. That was in the '80s; people came to us pre-evangelized. They grew up in a Christian culture. They already knew who Jesus was. In sales terms, someone just needed to close the deal.

I don't have to tell you that things have changed dramatically. The word *evangelism* is taboo today. You mention the word and already, I'm (Dave) sure you're thinking of all sorts of scary and awkward situations: passing out tracts to strangers; knocking on doors; awkward discussions on social media; proclaiming Scripture in the streets and marching with John 3:16 signs (I'm dating myself, but you get the picture). For most Christians, *evangelism* is an intimidating word.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. When you think of the word “evangelism” what images or phrases come to mind first?

2. Do these images or phrases align with what you just read about Jesus’ words? Why or why not?

3. What activation challenges are you currently facing when it comes to mobilizing your congregation toward evangelism?

The word *evangelism* is taboo today. . . . For most Christians, it's an intimidating word.

I (Dave) no longer use the word *evangelism* in church. I planted Community Christian Church in Chicago 33 years ago. I bet there's not been one message series we've ever titled with anything to do with evangelism.

In our polarized nation, *evangelism* is directly associated with another controversial word: *evangelicalism*. For much of the world, especially the United States, both words trigger thoughts of colonization, rigidity, stubbornness and even, at times, a mean-spirited or forceful approach. The word *evangelism* has lost its meaning because in many ways, *evangelicalism* has lost its center: coming to know Jesus.

When I (Rick) think back to the days of Billy Graham crusades, Billy captured an *evangelicalism* that leaned heavily on social engagement but never drifted from the focus on the gospel and calling people to Christ—a desire to see everyone on earth come into the Kingdom of God. Today, we've let other things become more important, and in doing so we've lost the ultimate depth of Jesus at the center. Following Jesus' personal mission glues us together as God's people and his Church. Right now, that's not happening. Today, the things that pull us apart are dominant.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

4. What do you notice about the use of the word *evangelism* in your congregation or community? Does it carry a negative connotation? Why or why not?

5. Consider Rick's closing statement: "the things that pull us apart are dominant." What topics or concepts are pulling your community apart? Or threatening to?

EVANGELISM TODAY

The stigma of our vocabulary has overflowed into how we view and treat evangelism in our churches today, especially when it comes to emerging generations—the future of the Church. Recent findings from two Barna Research studies give us insight into how younger Christians are thinking about evangelism.

The 2019 “Reviving Evangelism” study found that Millennials today believe (at a significantly higher rate than other generations) that evangelism is wrong. Almost half (47%) of Millennials believe that it’s “wrong to share one’s personal beliefs with someone of a different faith in hopes they will one day share the same faith.”²

But at the same time, Christians still recognize that evangelism was central to Jesus’ mission. The study notes that two out of three Millennials that practice Christianity believe that being a witness for Jesus is part of their faith. This confusion about evangelism has left the church with a lackluster approach to reaching the lost.

Another Barna report done in 2021, “Reviving Evangelism in the Next Generation,” broke out specific attitudes for Gen Z (10 to 25 years old) who identify as “Christian.”³ Some key findings:

- Christians in Gen Z don’t actually want to say that much. Instead of hoping to find the right words, they want their actions to speak. Almost 60% agree: “It’s most important that my actions consistently represent my faith,” while only 25% say, “It’s most important that I know the right thing to say.”
- Just over one in three Christian Gen Zers (35%) say they’ve had one or two conversations about their faith identity with a non-Christian within the past year. Almost a quarter (23%) said it has happened three to five times, and 21% report even higher frequency. One in five (22%), however, says they haven’t had any conversations with non-Christians in the past year.
- Although practicing Christian teens in America have more frequent faith conversations, their Millennial peers more often say they actively seek them out.

We know these are difficult statistics. But do these numbers really surprise you? Deep down, you know that we’ve lost our focus. It’s time to face some hard truth and get serious about leading and multiplying churches that both live out and share the gospel. If we continue on this trajectory, we have no hope of fulfilling Christ’s Great Commission.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

6. Do these study statistics match the conversations you're having in your church or community? Why or why not?

7. Does your church or community currently have a training or development pathway dedicated to helping members understand how to share the gospel?

A PRIORITY IN OUR CHURCHES?

Can we say that evangelism is a priority in our churches today? Unfortunately, that's a resounding "no." (If your church has evangelism as a priority, that's great. But we would challenge you to spend some time asking if that's reality or your perception).

All around us, we see evidence that the Church is becoming less and less concerned about the gospel and proclaiming it. We spend more time, energy, and resources on growing our churches, building buildings, and championing political and social causes than we do on Jesus' personal mission. I (Rick) am very committed to justice and being a force for the kingdom in the here and now. But when we get obsessed with these things, our focus loses eternity; it loses evangelism. We're making some things more ultimate than the gospel. The more fragmented we become, the less focused we are on the lost cause.

How did we get here? There are a variety of reasons. Here are several to get us started:

We have a lack of training. Most people and pastors have long had the "aha" moment that I had when I was starting out. I can't keep assaulting people with the gospel and treating people as projects or leave them feeling like a group to be conquered, won, or colonized. It's not going to work, so we've moved away from evangelism training. The predominant approach to evangelism is still grounded in a church growth theory. If we can get butts in the seats, then the pastor can evangelize them.

We've focused on church growth.

Somewhere along the way, the swell of the church growth movement happened. We saw people come to faith. Often this was conversion growth, but we did see some people come to faith in large gatherings like that. In the West, we are still stuck with this as a prevailing model.

We've misunderstood discipleship.

We are realizing that our focus has been on church growth not evangelism. We've done a poor job of discipleship and in doing a poor job of discipleship, we've also misunderstood discipleship. Part of discipleship is evangelism (more on that later).

Church leaders haven't modeled evangelism.

We've put too much weight on our sermons and not enough on what we model. The operating system we have pulls leaders away from the world and into the minutia of administration. Even leaders who planted their churches because they had a passion to reach the lost are no longer modeling evangelism.

So where do we go from here? The previous generation's "win souls" approach isn't an option. It's not working to just be good people and wait to be asked. For the most part, they're not asking.

Just like we believe it's so important to create a culture of multiplication in our churches, we think it's just as vital and urgent to create a culture of evangelism. What does that look like and how do we do it?

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

8. Which of the above reasons we've lost sight of evangelism resonate most strongly with you? Why?

9. Do you feel you're a part of a culture of evangelism? Why or why not?

A church with a culture of evangelism will hold the biblical *values* of evangelism, share the compelling *narratives* of evangelism, and live out the faith *behaviors* of an evangelistic church.

CREATING A CULTURE OF EVANGELISM

When we talk about culture, we're referring to spontaneous, repeated patterns of thinking and action. Strong cultures rely on strong patterns. We create those strong patterns by shaping and reinforcing values, narrative and behaviors. That's what we're talking about in this series.

A church with a culture of evangelism will hold the biblical *values* of evangelism, share the compelling *narratives* of evangelism, and live out the faith *behaviors* of an evangelistic church. We can't wait to unpack these themes with you in the next four workbooks in this series. What would it look like to lead and be part of a church who is on mission with Jesus—telling stories of transformed lives, revitalized communities and changed eternities? Let's find out together.

WHERE DO I GO FROM HERE?

As we continue exploring this topic together, we want to prayerfully move our thoughts and ideas into action. At the end of each workbook, we'll list three resources that will help you explore evangelism on a deeper level. We'll also provide space for you to process what you've learned and craft next steps that make sense for you.

CONTINUE LEARNING

[Podcast: How to Revive Evangelism with Craig Springer](#)

[Video: ReThinking Evangelism with Efrem Smith](#)

[Resource: Exponential Evangelism & Culture Resource Kit](#)

CREATE YOUR PLAN

NEXT STEP: NAME YOUR REALITIES

What does the term *evangelism* mean to you?

List the groups of people God has called you to lead. You can definitely include a church congregation if you're pastoring or planting, but this list can also include your small group or Bible study, your family, or a group of neighbors.

Take another look at the list above—what does evangelism mean to each of these groups? To the best of your knowledge, how would they define or view this term?

COMING NEXT

The next workbook in this Lost Cause series will help us explore the values of evangelism and understand how the values of individuals and groups intersect and interact to form cultures.

Received this from a friend? **Visit exponential.org/lostcause to sign up to receive every workbook in the series.**

ENDNOTES

- 1 <https://www.barna.com/research/millennials-oppose-evangelism/>
- 2 <https://www.barna.com/research/millennials-oppose-evangelism>
- 3 <https://www.barna.com/nextgenevangelism/>



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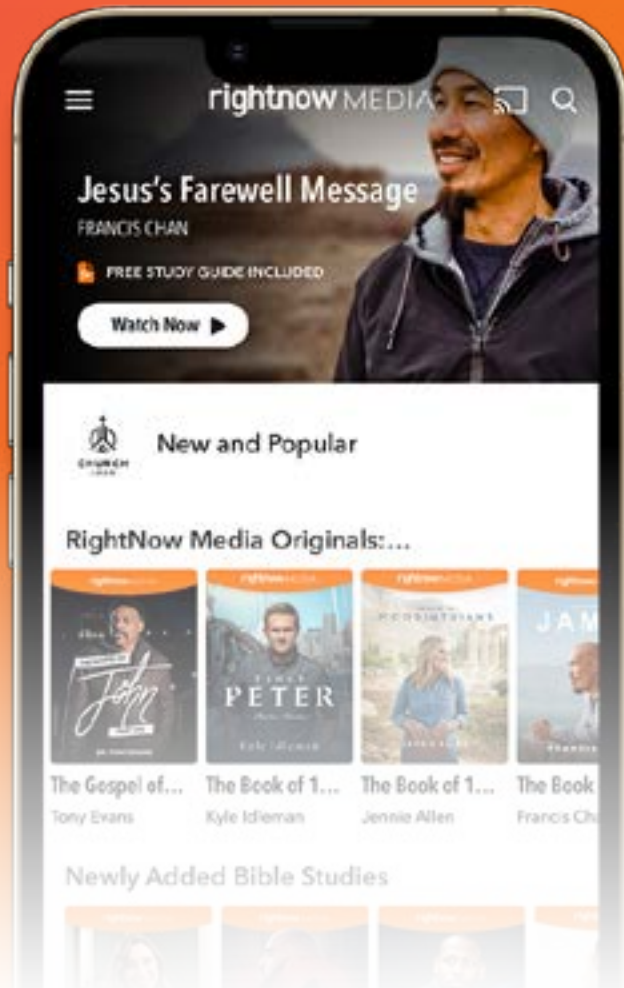
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“FOR THE SON OF MAN CAME TO SEEK AND SAVE THE LOST” - LUKE 19:10

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LOST  **CAUSE** 
REVIVING EVANGELISM

WE HAVE A PROBLEM! Evangelism has become a taboo word and confusion about evangelism has left the church with a lackluster approach to reaching the lost.

THERE IS A SOLUTION! We must be about the mission of Jesus: “to seek and to save the lost” (Luke 19:10). That means we must revive evangelism. A church with a culture of evangelism will hold the Biblical values of evangelism, share the compelling narratives of evangelism, and live out the white-hot faith behaviors of an evangelistic church.

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