

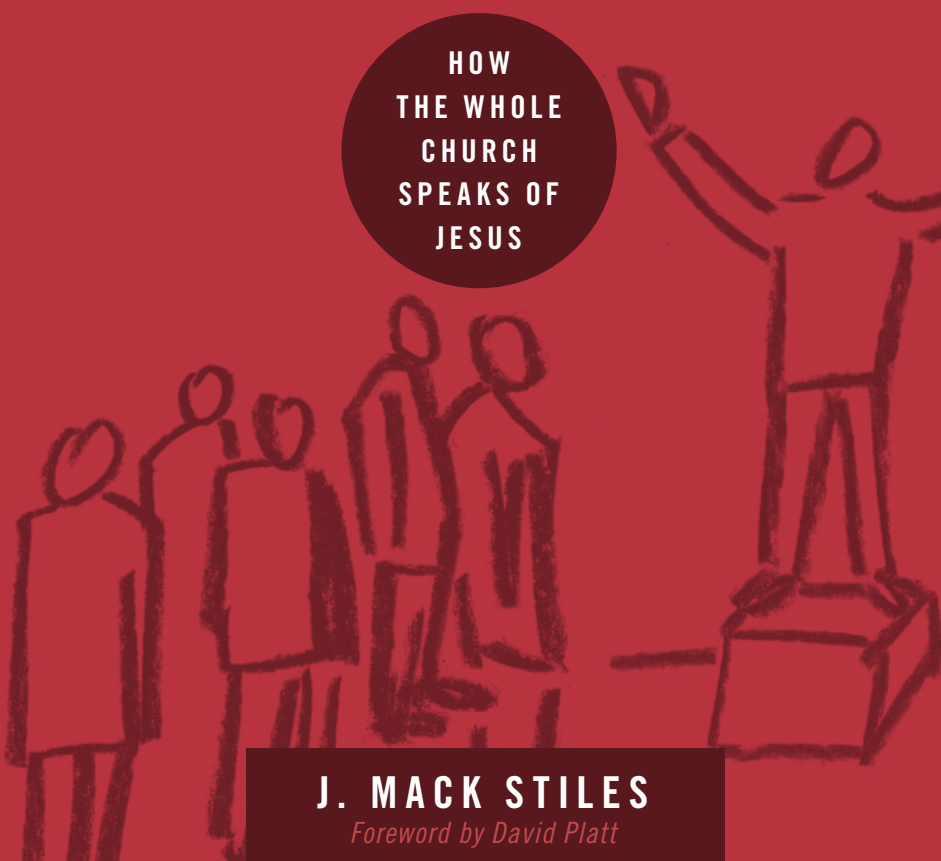
IX 9Marks BUILDING HEALTHY CHURCHES

EVANGELISM

HOW
THE WHOLE
CHURCH
SPEAKS OF
JESUS

J. MACK STILES

Foreword by David Platt



"Anyone who knows Mack Stiles knows he would find it difficult to be boring, even if he decided to be. The book you are holding incites Christians, not least pastors, to burn to see evangelism become part of the local church's culture, a driving component of its spiritual DNA. This book is rich in practical implications, not *despite* its incessant focus on Jesus and the gospel, but precisely *because* of such focus. It deserves to be read, pondered, and implemented."

D. A. Carson, Research Professor of New Testament, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

"The best book on evangelism would be a book that gets right to the heart of the issue and that is written by one who is himself an evangelist. In other words, it would be this book. Mack Stiles is one of the most natural, effective, determined, indefatigable evangelists that I know. I would want to know what he thinks about evangelism, whether it comes in a conversation, a letter, or an entire book. In this short volume, Mack conducts a clear and biblical exploration of how church fellowship multiplies individual evangelism. Every reader will be inspired, encouraged, and equipped to be a congregational evangelist. For the sake of the church, the gospel, and the world, this book belongs at the top of your reading list."

R. Albert Mohler, Jr., President and Joseph Emerson Brown Professor of Christian Theology, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

"God gifted Mack Stiles as an evangelist, and this book is the overflow of that gift. I know of few works that combine the theological rigor, pastoral wisdom, and personal experience that Mack packs into this short book. In places I was encouraged, in others challenged. I loved reading this book and recommend it heartily."

J. D. Greear, Lead Pastor, The Summit Church, Durham, North Carolina; author, *Stop Asking Jesus into Your Heart: How to Know for Sure You Are Saved*

"Mack Stiles writes about developing a culture of evangelism in a way that allows the reader to see it! We not only read the truth in this book, we drink in a vision for how our church families can live in a rich, dynamic way. This may be the shortest but most important book you ever read for the life of your church and the spread of the gospel."

Thabiti M. Anyabwile, Senior Pastor, First Baptist Church of Grand Cayman; author, *What Is a Healthy Church Member?*

“The church’s ancient mission to make disciples of all nations is still our top priority today. Our need to be equipped in sharing our faith is undeniably urgent. This is a book about real people learning to share the good news about a real Messiah. It is instructive, encouraging, and compelling—you won’t want to wait to apply what you learn in these pages. And if anyone knows how to equip people to speak of Jesus, it’s Mack Stiles!”

Gloria Furman, Pastor’s wife, Redeemer Church of Dubai; mother of four; author, *Glimpses of Grace* and *Treasuring Christ When Your Hands Are Full*

“I am genuinely excited about this book. Stiles’s books on evangelism are terrific because they combine practical help with theological maturity. And he actually practices what he prescribes.”

Kevin DeYoung, Senior Pastor, University Reformed Church, East Lansing, Michigan

“Mack Stiles has written an outstanding book not just about sharing the gospel (though it is about that) or about being a personal evangelist (though it’s that, too). He’s written a book about how the local church actually helps us share the gospel—eases the burden, instructs, excites, cooperates. Read this little book and be encouraged!”

Mark Dever, Senior Pastor, Capitol Hill Baptist Church, Washington, D.C.; President, 9Marks

“I read this engaging book in a single sitting because I was so taken by its content and spirit. *Evangelism* is a primer on how the Bible addresses the crucial subject of sharing the gospel. I anticipate its wide and enthusiastic reception.”

Daniel L. Akin, President, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary

“I love Mack Stiles’s vision of ‘a culture of evangelism’ permeating our churches. May God work powerfully to bring this vision to reality. This book both encourages and challenges, and, like Mack’s previous books, is a great gift and blessing to God’s people.”

Randy Newman, Teaching Fellow, C. S. Lewis Institute; author, *Questioning Evangelism*, *Corner Conversations*, and *Bringing the Gospel Home*

“Plenty of books discuss individual evangelism. This one, however, zeroes in on an entire culture. Not methods or programs, but an ethos. Spread this book through your church and see what happens.”

John Folmar, Senior Pastor, The United Church of Dubai

“This is a Christ-exalting, gospel-saturated book on evangelism unlike any other. Rather than giving you a *personal* methodology, it deeply motivates you to proclaim and bear the fruit of the revolutionary news of Jesus *as a church body*. And what makes it even more valuable is that I have seen Mack Stiles model the attitudinal culture he writes about on several continents to the glory of God. He is the most gifted evangelist I have seen God use (so far), bar none. *Evangelism* is a must read for every pastor *and* church member.”

Richard Chin, National Director, Australian Fellowship of Evangelical Students; South Pacific Regional Secretary, International Fellowship of Evangelical Students

“It did not take long for this book to become my favorite book on evangelism—in part because I could not put it down! The gospel is so clear and the help I received is so tangible. But let the reader count the cost. It may stir something within you that you cannot shake. I will now never be satisfied with anything less than cultivating a culture of evangelism in the church I pastor. I praise God for what he gave me through this book and I pray for more.”

Jason C. Meyer, Pastor for Preaching and Vision, Bethlehem Baptist Church

“Imagine a local church where every member knows the gospel and walks in step with it, where all are concerned for unbelieving people, where it is natural for leaders and members to talk about evangelistic opportunities, and where members are regularly inviting unbelievers to read the Bible together or to attend small group Bible studies or Sunday services. If that sounds encouraging to you, then you’ll want to read this book and let Mack guide you step by step toward a culture of evangelism where evangelism is simply a natural outflow of the gospel life.”

Juan R. Sanchez, Jr., Pastor, High Pointe Baptist Church, Austin, Texas

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SERIES PREFACE

Do you believe it's your responsibility to help build a healthy church? If you are a Christian, we believe that it is.

Jesus commands you to make disciples (Matt. 28:18–20). Jude says to build yourselves up in the faith (Jude 20–21). Peter calls you to use your gifts to serve others (1 Pet. 4:10). Paul tells you to speak the truth in love so that your church will become mature (Eph. 4:13, 15). Do you see where we are getting this?

Whether you are a church member or leader, the Building Healthy Churches series of books aims to help you fulfill such biblical commands and so play your part in building a healthy church. Another way to say it might be, we hope these books will help you grow in loving your church like Jesus loves your church.

9Marks plans to produce a short, readable book on each of what Mark has called nine marks of a healthy church, plus one more on sound doctrine. Watch for books on expositional preaching, biblical theology, the gospel, conversion, evangelism, church membership, church discipline, discipleship and growth, and church leadership.

Local churches exist to display God's glory to the nations. We do that by fixing our eyes on the gospel of Jesus Christ, trusting him for salvation, and then loving one another with

Series Preface

God's own holiness, unity, and love. We pray the book you are holding will help.

With hope,
Mark Dever and Jonathan Leeman
Series editors

FOREWORD

I remember the first time I met Mack Stiles. We were speaking at a conference together in the United States, and while I and other conference speakers spent most of our time talking with each other, Mack was rarely to be found among us. I wondered why not, until I discovered that Mack was spending most of his time talking about Jesus with the people who worked behind the scenes at the facility where the conference was being held. From that first interaction with this brother, I knew I had much to learn from him.

Not long thereafter, I had the privilege of being overseas in the location where Mack leads a ministry to college students and serves as one of the elders of a church. I was preaching at the church one morning, and after I finished, Mack started introducing me to all sorts of people. Here's the general gist of how those conversations went (though I've changed the names).

“Hi, my name is Abdul,” one man said to me. “I grew up as a Muslim, but a couple of years ago, God graciously saved me from my sins and myself through Christ.”

“That’s wonderful,” I responded. “How did you hear the gospel?”

“Through my friendship with Mack,” Abdul said. “He asked me one day if I wanted to read through the Gospel of Mark with

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him. I told him I was willing, and within a few months, the Holy Spirit had opened my heart to believe.”

Then I turned to another man, who introduced himself. “Hey, I’m Rajesh. I was a Hindu all my life until someone invited me to this church. I didn’t know anything about Christianity until I got here, but Mack and others started meeting with me and showing me who Christ is and what Christ has done. I was overwhelmed, and after exploring all sorts of questions that I had with Mack, I trusted in Christ for my salvation.”

Behind Abdul and Rajesh was Matthew. Matthew said to me: “I grew up a nominal Christian devoid of any relationship with Christ, but last year God opened my eyes to what faith in Christ truly means. I repented of my sins and believed in him.”

“Let me guess,” I said. “Mack led you to Christ, right?”

“No,” Matthew said. “Abdul and Rajesh did. They spent hours with me in Scripture, showing me what it means to follow Christ.” Then Matthew asked me: “Can I introduce you to Stephen? He’s a friend of mine who is exploring Christianity right now, and he came with me to the church gathering this morning.”

These conversations went on and on with person after person. I stood literally amazed by the grace of God, not just upon one Christian passionate about sharing the gospel, but upon an entire community passionate about sharing the gospel. As I looked around, I observed a contagious culture of evangelism across the church. It is a culture of evangelism that is not ultimately dependent on events, projects, programs, and ministry professionals. Instead, it is a culture of evangelism that is built on people filled with the power of God’s Spirit proclaiming the

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gospel of God's grace in the context of their everyday lives and relationships.

As a result, I truly cannot think of anyone better to write a book not just on cultivating the discipline of evangelism as a Christian, but on creating a culture of evangelism in the church. When I read through this book, I found myself highlighting sentence after sentence, paragraph after paragraph, praying all along about the way the Lord might use me to create such a culture of evangelism in the church I pastor.

This book is biblical and practical. It's good for church members and leaders, and ultimately it's glorifying to God. May the Lord see fit to bless it in your life and church—and in multitudes of lives and churches—to the end that his church might see more and more Abduls, Rajeshes, Matthews, and Stephens come to saving faith in Christ here and around the world.

David Platt
Senior pastor, The Church at Brook Hills
Birmingham, Alabama

INTRODUCTION

“And what is your book about, dear?”

So asked the elderly woman who was picking up my mother-in-law for their weekly game of bridge. As I put the walker in the back seat of her car, I pondered what to say. I wanted to say, “It’s not just a book on evangelism, but a book on developing a culture of evangelism.” She sensed my hesitation, glanced at my mother-in-law, and said, “Well, what is the title, dear?”

Again I paused, looking up at the sky. My mother-in-law came to the rescue: “It’s about evangelism.” She said this in that tone reserved for people whose hearing is not quite what it used to be.

“Oh,” said her friend. There was a bit of a question mark after her “oh.” I shut the car door.

“Well, it’s more about getting the *whole church* to share their faith,” I said.

The friend looked even more puzzled. “Hmm,” she said. Then she turned to my mother-in-law. “Well, Ann, I know you’re *so proud*,” she said as she patted my arm. Never mind that the author himself couldn’t seem to figure out what his book was about.

Let me try to do better for you. This book is about *biblical* evangelism. Now I don’t think that Christian people set out to

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write books on evangelism based on unbiblical principles. But it happens. It happens because there are wrong ideas about the critical components of evangelism. Usually the wrong ideas are based on marketing principles or on human understandings about how to argue someone into the kingdom. If we don't have biblical evangelism nailed down, we may not be doing evangelism.

For example, a housewife meeting with a friend over coffee may be evangelizing, while a brilliant Christian apologist speaking to thousands in a church sanctuary may not be. Few see it that way, but that's because we have false understandings of what evangelism is. Defending the faith is a fine thing to do, but it is easy to give apologetics for Christianity without explaining the gospel—and we cannot evangelize without the gospel.

We need to know what we're talking about when we say "evangelism," "conversion," or even "gospel." Those words raise different definitions in people's minds and often come with question marks. If Christians don't understand those basic concepts, we will quickly spin out of the biblical orbit. So we'll spend some time wrestling with definitions in chapter 1.

By the way, many might want to use the word *missional* for what I am calling a "culture of evangelism." I understand why they might, but I want to retain the word *evangelism*. It's an important biblical word, and that's the word I use throughout the book.

This book is about evangelism, but more than that, it's also about developing a culture of evangelism. That's chapter 2. When I say "a culture of evangelism," I don't mean lots of pro-

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grams for evangelism. In fact, it may surprise you that I would encourage many churches to cut their evangelistic programs. I'll tell you why later, but it's enough to say here that I want to explore how we can integrate the responsibility that every Christian bears to share the faith into the life of our church fellowships, multiplying individual efforts.

Much of our problem with evangelism is that we don't have a big enough view of the church. I believe that God loves the world and has a wonderful plan for evangelism: his church. That is chapter 3.

Since this book is about evangelism and a culture of evangelism in church life, it also describes the platforms—often neglected—that Christians must build for healthy evangelistic efforts. This is the topic of chapter 4. Examples:

- Intentional evangelism preparation
- A gospel-shaped way of life
- Not assuming the gospel
- Evangelism as a spiritual discipline
- Prayer
- Evangelistic leadership

Then, of course, we need to explore basic principles that shape the actual practice of sharing our faith, those things we need to do to live as Christ's ambassadors to a sin-sick world. That's chapter 5.

I have good friends who think of me as an evangelist; I'm not so sure. I do long for people to know Jesus. And I feel as though I am someone seeking to be faithful in evangelism. But I want people to know that I really face fears of what oth-

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ers think of me when I talk about spiritual issues. I'm very aware of my failings and limitations in evangelism. And looking around, I see many others who are much better evangelists than I. If I'm an evangelist, I'm a mediocre one.

But there is one thing that I think, by God's grace, I am good at: I believe God has used me to develop cultures of evangelism. Over the years, as I've helped to establish student ministries or plant churches, I've wanted to make sure that those communities had evangelism in their DNA, as their ethos and culture.

That is a driving passion for me, and that's why I'm excited about this book. It's a way to take those things I've loved putting together and share them with you.

OF ALTAR CALLS AND LASER LIGHTS

I was a freshly minted 1970s-era Jesus freak. During the first months of my first year in college, I led my friend and roommate, John, to Jesus. One Sunday, not long after, we decided to attend the large Baptist church in downtown Memphis.

I cut quite a figure: I sported a huge red Afro, bell-bottom jeans, and a purple wool trench coat. We were amid crew cuts and suits.

The preacher preached, all stanzas were sung, and then came the invitation. The preacher announced sternly that he would rather have someone leave during his sermon than during the invitation, “the most important part of the service.”

The appeal came for people to give their lives to Jesus. Hands were raised. We were thanked and then told to “just slip out” of our seats and come forward. “If you can’t publicly stand up for Jesus in church, you won’t ever stand up for him outside these walls,” the preacher said. The logic seemed ironclad to me.

John, whose head was bowed but whose eyes were opened (against instructions), whispered to me, “Do you think I should go forward?”

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“Well, it can’t hurt,” I whispered back, “I’ll go with you.” John popped up from the pew and I followed.

Dozens “slipped” out of their seats and streamed forward. Unbeknownst to us, they were mostly ushers. Up front, the semicircular rows of pews surrounded us. The congregation, more numerous than had appeared from our back-row seats, seemed to lean forward and focus on us, smiling.

In a flash, the preacher was by my side. “Son,” he said to me in a kindly voice, “why are you here today?” He held his mike down against his leg and curled the long speaker cord behind his feet with a practiced flick of the wrist.

“Well,” I said, “my friend John here accepted Jesus a couple of weeks ago, and he wanted to stand up for Jesus.” The pastor glanced over at John, whose life was a mess, but who dressed conservatively. He nodded to John, “That’s wonderful, son.” Turning back to me, he said, “And what brings you forward?”

I was gazing up at the balcony and the bright Klieg lights with a sort of gee-whiz, country-boy-in-the-big-city look on my face. “Well, I . . . wanted to support John,” I stammered.

“I see,” he said, nodding, his arm now draped over my shoulder. “Are you a Christian, son?”

“I am,” I said.

“And would you like to rededicate your life to Jesus?” The theological complexities of this question escaped me, so I said, “Well, sure, I guess.”

The preacher then pressed the microphone to his lips and stared up at the balcony, too. He located the recently installed TV camera and pointed to it with his hand, fingers spread. “I’d like to say to all you in TV land, these two young men have

come to give their lives to Jesus. You can do that in your home, right now, where you sit . . .”

It took me years to figure out what had just happened.

WHAT IS EVANGELISM?

When I think back to that service so many years ago, I want to ask: Did evangelism happen that morning in that church?

We should be careful how we answer. Many people have become Christians when they walked an aisle after hearing an altar call. Recently, at a pastor’s convention at Southeastern Seminary, the president, Danny Akin, noted that the gathered pastors were culturally sophisticated, well educated, and theologically robust. None of them would think of leading an altar call such as the one I experienced in Memphis. But then Akin asked, “How many of you came to faith in a church that evangelized in ways you would now reject?” Almost every pastor raised his hand.

This response should give us pause. There is much room for humility when it comes to evangelism. We need to acknowledge that God is sovereign and can do as he wills to bring people to himself. There is no formula that dictates how God must work in evangelism. And though we may disagree with the evangelistic practices of individuals, ministries, or churches, we must also recognize that when people develop good-hearted commitments to evangelism, God can produce true fruit.

I, for one, will take people practicing evangelism as best they can over those who forgo evangelism until they have the perfect practice. Remember how gently Priscilla and Aquila

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instructed Apollos in his evangelistic efforts (Acts 18:26)? Paul even rejoiced over selfishly motivated evangelism that caused trouble for him (Phil. 1:17–18). So when people come to faith through strange means and methods, we should first take heart that God can take the smallest seeds of gospel truth and grow them into the great fruit of gospel reconciliation in people's hearts.

Let me be clear: I do not think altar calls are categorically wrong. Yet when I think back to my experience in Memphis, it's easy to see how the methods of those days were driven mostly by a desire for instant results: there was too much emphasis on a decision or on walking an aisle, too much concern about the watching TV audience, and too little concern about the actual state of my soul and my sin.

Many people have responded to altar calls over the decades. But for all who have been genuinely converted when they responded, there have been many more who merely came to the front of a church building out of some other compulsion—just like John and me. Most important, even though people come to Jesus through various means, the Bible *never* uses results to guide or justify evangelistic practice.

So when we set out to practice evangelism, we must start with biblical foundations. We must look to these to shape, guard, and inform how we share our faith rather than starting by looking for a way to gain maximum impact. We must be very careful to conform our evangelistic practice to the Bible, because this honors God.

Sadly, what often informs our evangelistic practices is the world—perhaps the business world or the self-help section in

the bookstore—rather than the Scriptures. Satan plays to our desire for results by offering a bigger TV ministry or financial profit. He even tempts us with seemingly good-hearted desires such as an expanded membership or the undying belief that if a child prays a sinner’s prayer, he or she has become a committed believer regardless of how he or she lives. In all this, people trade biblical principles for worldly desires, and our evangelistic practices get twisted.

Paul could rejoice over the gospel being preached regardless of motive because he knew God would accomplish his purposes through his Word. But Paul also corrected twisted evangelistic practices: he stressed that we must not manipulate, change the message, or deceive (e.g., 2 Cor. 4:1–2). Instead, we should seek pure motives in love for people and Christ, with a deep conviction of truth (2 Cor. 5:11–15). And we must trust that the Lord will add to our numbers (Acts 2:47).

Think of how much in that Memphis church service teetered on the edge of error:

- Did the pastor truly believe that the most important part of the service was the invitation rather than the Word of God rightly preached?
- Where in the Bible do we see people raising their hands to ask Jesus into their hearts? And when did walking an aisle replace baptism as a public display of our faith—at a *Baptist* church, for crying out loud?
- Wasn’t it manipulative to have ushers slip out of their seats in an apparent response to the invitation? Didn’t the use of unbiblical terms such as “rededicate your life to Jesus” fail to put forth the truth plainly (2 Cor. 4:2)?

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- Did the pastor mean to publicly lie when he said John and I had just given our lives to Jesus, though we really had not? Or was he so blinded by cultural lenses that he just missed the two brothers in Christ who stood before him? Were we just a foil to show the world the effectiveness of his evangelistic efforts?

Actually, the two guys standing before him were the biggest thing he missed, and that oversight is what makes me want to jump up and down and holler. He missed a living example of the best kind of evangelism: an eighteen-year-old kid who could not have found the book of Mark without help from the table of contents had just led his friend to Jesus simply by loving him enough to explain what he knew about the gospel message. And I suspect that the congregation was so blinded by the razzmatazz of a slick program and a TV audience that they didn't think about it, either.

A DEFINITION FOR EVANGELISM

So how do we know when evangelism is happening? Well, the answer depends on how we define evangelism. Defining evangelism in a biblical way helps us align our evangelistic practice with the Scriptures. Here's a definition that has served me well for many years:

Evangelism is teaching the gospel with the aim to persuade.

Sort of dinky, huh? I bet most people would expect much more from such an important theological word. But this definition, small as it is, offers a far better balance in which to

weigh our evangelistic practice than looking at how many people have responded to an appeal.

Around the same time that John and I attended the Memphis church, I bought John a Bible. It was the Amplified Bible, which, if you haven't seen it, offers stacks of synonyms for key words. Here is how the Amplified Bible might have expanded my definition:

Evangelism is teaching (heralding, proclaiming, preaching) the gospel (the message from God that leads us to salvation) with the aim (hope, desire, goal) to persuade (convince, convert).

Notice that the definition does not require an immediate outward response. Walking an aisle, raising a hand, or even praying a prayer may tell us that evangelism has happened, but such actions are not what evangelism is. Notice, too, that if any of the four components are missing, we are probably doing something other than evangelism.

If I could, I would love to go back in time and teach the church in Memphis what evangelism really is. I would warn that there is much sickness in the church worldwide because of churches calling something evangelism when it is not. "Please," I would beg, "when you teach, don't teach people about how to behave during an invitation. Teach clearly what the gospel is and what is required of a person to turn to Christ."

I would urge the church to aim to persuade, but to persuade without manipulation. I would encourage them not to exclude what is hard about the Christian life, however tempting that may be; not to confuse human response for a move of

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the Spirit; and not to lie about results. “And please,” I would say, “be wary of calling people Christians without some evidence that they are truly converted followers.”

Of course, by today’s standards, it’s easy to sneer at those old church practices. But if we are honest, we have to say that we face the same temptation to sacrifice biblical principles for results and “success.” As I look around, I don’t see that much has changed besides the form in which we practice unbiblical evangelism. The gospel often remains untaught, and unbiblical words water down the poignant true meaning of sin, death, and hell, or confuse those who are genuinely seeking truth.

Promises of health and wealth deceive the most vulnerable: the poor, disadvantaged, and sick. And many churches offer a costless, comfortable, and benefit-giving “gospel” that is found nowhere in the Scriptures. In fact, the gospel is subverted with what Paul calls “different gospels,” which are not gospels at all (Gal. 1:6–7). By catering to the desires of people, churches communicate that their focus is on non-Christians, not on the glory of God displayed by his people worshipping him.

The soaring choir riffs have been replaced by laser light shows, so that a church service becomes an avenue for entertainment rather than worship. Jesus was engaging, but he never entertained; there is a huge difference, one that is lost on the modern church. Likewise, appealing for friends, followers, and converts through social media seems much like yesteryear’s TV camera in the balcony: both can tempt church leaders to miss the people in front of them. The high-pressure sales job has been replaced by the soft sell of self-help.

These kinds of things are the result of the same worldly temptations that undermine biblical evangelism, so much so that those who sneer at the old practices may need to apologize to that church back in Memphis.

But there is an answer to such temptations. It's no different today than it was in my first year in college or in the first churches in Paul's day. The solution is to fix biblically principled, gospel-centered evangelism in our minds and hearts. It is to learn how to teach the gospel with integrity and to keep the big-picture aim of true conversion in view.

So let's carefully "amplify" the four parts of my definition: "teaching," "gospel," "aim," and "persuade."

TEACHING

First, there is no evangelism without words. After all, Jesus is the Word, and the Word was with God (John 1:1).

The most important use of words in evangelism is teaching. If you think about it, this makes rational sense. We humans are unable to figure out a way of salvation on our own. Therefore, salvation must be revealed to us by God through his words.

Teaching is also the pattern of the Bible. The Bible is a book of teaching. From Genesis to Revelation, the Bible teaches us. And the Bible tells us to teach others: our kids, our neighbors, the foreigners in our midst. Older women are instructed to teach younger women. The only qualification for elders, besides being careful followers of Jesus, is that they are able to teach.

Perhaps because teaching is everywhere in the Scriptures,

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we can miss its significance. Jesus saw that the crowds were like sheep without a shepherd, so he fed thousands with a few loaves of bread and fish (Mark 6:34–44; Luke 9:10–17). These miracles amaze us, as they should. But the interesting thing is that in each instance, Jesus's *first* act of compassion was to teach.

Many of us think of preaching when we think of evangelism, as we should. I, for one, want any sermon I give to contain the gospel. Certainly Paul did his share of evangelistic preaching. But often when Paul describes his ministry, he says it is a teaching ministry (1 Tim. 2:7; 2 Tim. 1:11). J. I. Packer, in his survey of Paul's evangelistic practice, says that Paul's method of evangelism was primarily a teaching method.¹

This is good news for those of us who don't get to preach every Sunday. Not all of us can be preachers, but we can all teach the gospel as opportunity comes. I often wonder whether more people come to faith over lunch when someone asks, "What did you think about the sermon today?" than during the sermon itself. Great things happen when we can teach the gospel.

Being able to teach the gospel benefits our spiritual lives as it makes sure we are living according to gospel themes. One of the first things we ought to do at the Communion table is to check whether our lives are aligned with the gospel. Ask yourself: Am I living a life of faith in Christ's work? Am I applying gospel grace to those around me? Do I give sacrificial forgiveness to those who have wronged me?

If you do not know how to teach the gospel, you may not truly understand it. And if you do not understand it, you may

not be a true Christian. I know many people who thought they were believers, but when they began to study the gospel in order to teach it, they realized they had never truly repented of sin and put their faith in Jesus.

But most important, remember that the gospel must be taught before someone can become a Christian.

When I have led people to Christ over the years, it has usually been because a non-Christian was willing to study the Scriptures with me. Perhaps it was a group of students looking into the Gospel of Mark at a camp or conference. It could have been a couple of people in a coffee shop or just one person during a lunch break. No matter where or with whom, the process is simple: we read the passage and talk about what it means. Over time, in ones and twos, people come to Jesus because they are taught the gospel. Such teaching may not be as exciting as a massive revival, but if every Christian did this with non-Christian friends, it would have far greater reach and authenticity.

GOSPEL

We don't teach math or biology. We teach the gospel. It's important to teach the gospel well because there is much confusion about it around the world.

There are two mistakes we can make about the gospel. We can make it too small or too big. Both mistakes turn on a very small hinge: misunderstandings about implications of the gospel. These implications flow out of our belief in the gospel message.

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A Shrunken Gospel

We make the gospel too small by thinking it only “gets us saved,” that it is a sort of fire insurance, without understanding that it has implications for all of life.

Since the gospel manifests the heart of God, it makes sense that the themes of the gospel should inform how we live—themes such as love, reconciliation, forgiveness, faith, humility, repentance, and more. Then we see that the gospel becomes both the door of salvation and the pattern for life.

Tim Keller has written wonderfully about gospel-centered living, how the gospel is not merely the ABCs of the Christian life—the way of salvation—but the A to Z of the Christian life.² It informs the way we live life. We will talk more about the gospel-centered life in chapter 4.

A Bloated Gospel

We make the gospel too big when we say that the gospel is everything. We do this when we think that we are saved by faith *and* the gospel’s various implications. For example, much of the Christian world believes we are saved by faith and good deeds. Others, maybe the majority, believe that it is faith and the law.

Many things have been added to the gospel throughout history. It is always the same mistake. People add things that may be good, even religious, such as living a moral life, taking care of the poor, or seeing the sacraments of baptism and Communion as critical for salvation. All of these are important parts of the Christian life and privileges for Christians. But while they spring out of the gospel, they cannot save us.

Additions to the gospel, however good or good-hearted, corrupt the gospel.

A Good Definition of the Gospel

So when we talk about living the life of a Christian, we are talking about living out the themes and implications of the gospel. But when we talk about salvation, we focus on the gospel message. When we share our faith, we center on that *message* that leads to salvation. It's important to note that when the Bible uses the word *gospel*, in the Old Testament³ as well as the New, it always does so in relationship to salvation.

Here's a good working definition:

The gospel is the joyful message from God that leads us to salvation.

This is another definition that appears to be underwhelming because we must ask, "What, then, is the message of salvation?"

The gospel *message* answers four big questions: Who is God? Why are we in such a mess? What did Christ do? And how can we get back to God? There are no more important questions to deal with in the world, and the answers are summarized in this outline: God, Man, Christ, Response (see the appendix for various Scripture passages that support this outline):

- God is our Creator. He is loving, holy, and just. One day he will execute perfect justice against all sin.
- People are made in the image of God. We are beautiful and amazing creatures with dignity, worth, and value. But

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through our willful, sinful rebellion against God, we have turned from being his children to his enemies. Still, all people have the capacity to be in a restored loving relationship with the living God.

- Christ is the Son of God, whose sinless life gave him the ability to become the perfect sacrifice. Through his death on the cross, he ransomed sinful people. Christ's death paid for the sins of all who come to him in faith. Christ's resurrection from the dead is the ultimate vindication of the truth of these claims.
- The response God requires from us is to acknowledge our sin, repent, and believe in Christ. So we turn from sin, especially the sin of unbelief, and turn to God in faith, with the understanding that we will follow him the rest of our days.

Another way to tell the same story is in an outline of Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Consummation. There are many other good summaries of the gospel. The particular outline you use doesn't matter as long as you teach the message people must know to be reconciled with God.

The hope in evangelism is that we so steep ourselves in gospel truth and gospel living, and so apply ourselves to gospel study, that the gospel can't help but come out of us.

AIM

As we teach the gospel, we have an aim. *Aim* is a small word, and it might be easy to skip over it as we parse the definition of evangelism. But aim may be the thing that trips us up most often in evangelism, especially more mature Christians.

Our aim springs from understanding that everyone we talk to is headed to one of two ends: eternal life or eternal punish-

ment. So we don't just lay out gospel facts academically or haphazardly. We have an aim or direction in our gospel teaching.

Aim also reminds us that people need more than a data transfer. Some who think of evangelism as only teaching do a good job of explaining, expanding, and answering questions, as we all should. All Christians should apply themselves to think through reasons for the hope we have in Christ, reasons that sweep aside the objections and questions. But as we set out the facts of the gospel, remembering evangelism's aim helps us to be compassionate, understanding, and loving (1 Pet. 3:15).

Having an aim helps us keep perspective on what we're doing. It steers us toward an end. Our aim helps us remember that much is at stake: to see people moved from darkness to light, from bondage to freedom. Aiming for something bigger helps us know which fights to pick and which to avoid.

I was on a radio show when a woman called: "Should I go to a Catholic christening for my sister's baby boy?" she asked. Then she began unloading some anger, even hatred, over the fact that her sister thought this would "save" her baby.

I interrupted: "I think you should go, but not to support an unbiblical understanding of conversion. I think you should go because you are shooting for a bigger target than just correcting your sister's theological misunderstanding about christening. You should go and be supportive, filled with love, because you long to have a voice to speak into your sister's life with the only way that she can be saved . . . and into your nephew's life down the road, for that matter."

I wanted her to have a better aim so she wouldn't miss the target of evangelism.

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PERSUADE

In evangelism, not just any aim will do. There is a very specific bull's-eye to our aim: to persuade people to convert, to become followers of Jesus.

Paul says we persuade others to follow Jesus (2 Cor. 5:11). I find the word *persuade* helpful, as it guards us from error: we persuade, but we do not manipulate; we persuade, but we are not the ones who bring about repentance or conversion. Of course, we long to see people converted because we understand that conversion is required for them to become Christians. But true conversion is the work of the Holy Spirit.

Conversion is actually the point of Christian faith that is most often misunderstood. It was confusing when Jesus taught it to a religious leader of his day (John 3). It is confusing to Christians and non-Christians today. So it's good to spend some time explaining it.

In the Muslim context where I live, many people from other faith backgrounds find it disorienting to hear me preach that no one is born a Christian, that all Christians are converts. Even those from Christian backgrounds are confused about conversion, because many come from traditions that emphasize that a person is a Christian because of external reasons. But the Bible clearly teaches that conversion is not a function of your parents' religion, of which church you join, or of what your passport says. It's not based on your academic achievements, even if they are from a religious institution. Conversion comes from true, conscious, genuine faith in Jesus.

But just as we cannot produce conversion, neither can we produce genuine faith. This also is the Holy Spirit's territory.

My friend Jeff was speaking to his fellow stockbroker about Christianity over lunch. As the conversation wound down, Jeff's colleague said with a patronizing tone, "Yeah, Jeff, I just wish I had your faith."

Jeff responded: "Well, faith is a gift. It really doesn't have anything to do with me. God is the one who gives it, so I'll pray for the gift of faith for you." This was not the answer the man expected, but it was exactly right. Conversion is required, but conversion is a function of genuine faith, which is given by the Spirit.

But perhaps the most important thing to understand about conversion is what it looks like after it happens.

FIRE IN A SYNAGOGUE: WHAT THE TRULY CONVERTED LOOK LIKE

Conversion isn't merely a good feeling. It's not just a change of mind. It's not turning over a new leaf. Those things may happen, but they can happen for reasons other than conversion. True conversion is unique. It's born out of repentance and faith, and its fruit is a changed life.

Recently, I went to hear James McPherson, the Pulitzer Prize-winning historian, lecture on naval battles during the Civil War. The lecture, sponsored by the local historical society, was held in a large synagogue. The auditorium was packed. There was a certain electricity in the air as we waited to hear from the well-known professor from Princeton.

As Dr. McPherson took the stage, he also took command.

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His resonant voice, dry wit, and astounding command of the material captivated the audience. But midway through the lecture, the fire alarm sounded. This was a serious alarm. There wasn't merely a loud "blat blat blat" coming from electronic horns; there were also strobe lights that ticked blinding flashes at odd intervals.

Dr. McPherson froze. His wide-eyed look reminded me of an owl woken suddenly from slumber. He rotated his head from side to side, not knowing what to do. Since no one in the audience apparently attended the synagogue, no one took charge. We just looked around, smiling at our neighbors and wondering what to do. For what seemed like an eternity, the alarm continued. People in the chairs began talking in small groups while waiting for the alarm to go off.

"Maybe there really is a fire," I thought. But I quickly dismissed the idea: false alarms are the norm; I figured the alarm just needed to be reset. Besides, no one else seemed to think there was a problem—except for one man who stood up, calmly walked to the exit, and left the building. I'm not sure that many noticed him. Soon the alarm stopped and Dr. McPherson continued where he had left off.

If this is a parable of true conversion, there was only one convert in the room, only one true believer; the rest of us were stuck in our rationalization. Some might have thought there was a fire, but they didn't really believe it enough to walk out. We aren't persuaded in a biblical sense unless we repent, place genuine faith in Jesus, and walk with him.

There you have it: the four parts of my definition of evangelism.

WHAT HAPPENS IF WE GET EVANGELISM WRONG?

Evangelism is teaching the gospel (the message from God that leads us to salvation) with the aim to persuade. If a church does not understand biblical evangelism, over time that church will be subverted. If we don't practice healthy evangelism, the dominoes start to fall:

- The focus of preaching and teaching turns to living a moral life, not a gospel-centered life.
- Non-Christians are lulled into thinking that they are okay in their lost state.
- Christians think that non-Christians are believers because they made a superficial outward commitment.
- The church baptizes those who are not believers.
- The church allows non-Christians into membership.
- Eventually, non-Christians become leaders in the church.
- A church becomes a subculture of nominalism.

Unbiblical evangelism is a method of assisted suicide for a church, so there is much at stake in getting evangelism right.

Evangelists are like the trained counselors who are called upon to talk to people threatening suicide. Their aim is to talk potential jumpers off “the ledge.” The counselors don't use force and don't lie. They use truth, hope, and reason to persuade. They stay calm and cool; plus, they are kind, because they know a life is at stake.

Just like them, we use the hope of the gospel to reason. We keep our cool and are kind, too, because we remember what is at stake. Our aim is to persuade people off the ledge. And there is great relief when someone is persuaded and moves into the safe embrace of the Savior.

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J. MACK STILES is CEO of Gulf Digital Solutions and general secretary for the Fellowship of Christian UAE Students (FOCUS) in the United Arab Emirates. In addition to working as a church planter for many years, he currently serves as an elder at Redeemer Church of Dubai. He is the author of *Marks of the Messenger* and *Speaking of Jesus*.

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