

Chapter Seven

Training Evangelists for a Post-Modern Canada

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Introduction

Once a year our local newspaper publishes an advertising section that can be viewed using special 3-D glasses. Without those glasses the advertising still makes sense. The information is present, the advertisements are colourful; readers would not detect anything amiss. However, when the ads are viewed with the 3-D glasses, everything takes on a new perspective; depth is added. This extra dimension makes parts of the ads more prominent, allowing the viewer to engage the ad by the illusion of entering it. Just as 3-D glasses changed the view for newspaper readers, so too has the cultural shift from modernism to post-modernism changed how many people view life. Post-moderns would say the clinical, matter-of-fact, analytical modernist perspective of life has failed. It's an inadequate lens for understanding the mystery that pervades all of life. Post-moderns are challenging us to see an extra dimensionality to life. It forces us to question how we see all things, including the Church.

This post-modern¹ perspective presents a twin challenge of opportunity and obstruction for the Church, and the evangelist in particular. The challenge of opportunity, if we have the courage, allows us to look again at what we have assumed about the way things are in regard to evangelism; things we did not even know we had assumed. The challenge of obstruction is to re-fashion a post-modern apologetic that adequately addresses the subjective, pluralistic, and relativistic philosophy of post-modern thought.

While the intent of this chapter is to engage in the former, looking at some of the assumptions that are held in regard to evangelism, it is driven out of a desire to meet the latter, so that the Church is adequately equipped to reach an ever-increasing post-modern culture. As a philosophy, there is a great distance between post-modernism and

Christianity; yet from a sociological perspective, the post-modern trend that appears to be emerging may offer reasons for hope.

The era of modernism was the celebration of the individual; post-modernism is a move toward community. Modernism longed for formulas; post-modernism seeks stories. The modernist looked for objective facts, while the post-modern hungers for a subjective experience. Modernism's need for scientific certainty is being replaced by post-modern's desire for metaphysical mysteries.

Under the assumptions of modernist reality, the training of evangelists has classically been to instruct in how to fashion a sermon—primarily focusing upon how to present a clear gospel message—which should contain a logical apologetic with regard to its reasonableness. The goal was to obtain an individual decision to follow the truth of the gospel. It seems that this method has rested upon the assumptions of a modernist foundation that are now in question.

While the presentation of the gospel in an attractive and reasonable manner will always be a part of what the evangelist does, I believe that the task of future evangelists is to fashion congregations to display the gospel in their corporate life together, so as to offer an experience of God's sacrificial love. Their² primary task should be that of equipping churches so that instead of non-Christians³ simply hearing the gospel told to them, they experience the gospel lived out among them. The "hearing"⁴ that is needed for conversion will come through individuals telling their story, as evangelists have equipped them.

The Evangelist's Job

By and large the traditional role of an evangelist was that of an itinerant preacher. Whether on the street corner or in a football stadium the evangelist's job was to proclaim the Good News of the Gospel. Billy Graham, perhaps the most famous of all evangelists of the past and current century, has summarized this perspective in these words: "An evangelist is called to do one thing and one thing only: to proclaim the Gospel."⁵ In fact, the preaching task of the evangelist is considered so foundational to his calling that it became synonymous with what the evangelist did. This assumption is clearly evidenced in the J.B. Phillips translation of Ephesians 4:11, where he paraphrases the word "evangelists" with "*preachers* of the Gospel."⁶

While the proclamation of the Gospel is certainly one of the tasks of the evangelist's calling, it is not the sole purpose. The word "evangelist" is found very rarely in the New Testament. One of the few places it is located is in Ephesians 4, where Paul says that the role of the evangelist is to "... prepare God's people for works of service..."⁷ The future evangelist will need to be trained to see his task not only as one who proclaims the Gospel, but primarily as an equipper of the Church.

Not only is the task of the evangelist to change, so also is the primary recipient of the evangelist's ministry. When the primary task is proclamation, the key recipients of the evangelist's energies are necessarily the non-Christian. But if equipping becomes the primary role, then the primary recipient also changes. The great evangelist to the Jews, the apostle Peter, was given a direct mandate from the resurrected Lord. "Simon son of John, do you love me?" asked Jesus. "*Feed my sheep.*"⁸ The gift of the evangelist is given first to the flock of Christ's Church. While this may seem obvious, the implication is that the key recipients of the evangelist's energies are now the Christians as the evangelist seeks to

“feed the sheep.” I am (this is important) not suggesting that the evangelist is meant to preach only within a Christian congregation. The proclamation of the Gospel to the non-Christian is a key function of the evangelist and must continue. However, I am suggesting that another key function is also to impregnate the Church with passion for reaching lost people—train, encourage, and instruct its members.

Along with the evangelist’s new task and new key recipients there is also a new scope to the evangelist’s ministry. The challenge now faced by the evangelist is to fashion a congregation into an incarnation of the Gospel. This challenge forces the evangelist to engage in the discipleship process of the Church, as he works to create a hunger and desire within the Body of Christ, to make the Gospel both known and felt, and then seeks to nurture the evangelism concepts that are birthed from the congregation itself.

The New Task

In my more skeptical moments it seems that the task of equipping the Church for evangelism is to get people who don't want to go, using an organization that is ill-prepared, to reach a people who at best are indifferent and at worse hostile. Is it any wonder that one writer has concluded that, "the Western world is now the toughest mission field on earth."⁹ Yet, it seems that every wall raised to keep the Church from growing has itself become a stepping stone to greater heights. Martyr’s blood became the seed of the early Church; its greatest creeds were written in the face of heresy. Perhaps the wall that seems so insurmountable to us will become a platform from which the light of Christ will shine more brightly yet. Could it be that an awakening of the evangelist’s ecclesiastic responsibility will be part of this great opportunity?

This new (or should I say renewed) understanding of the evangelist’s role will require a new skill set for the evangelist. Training evangelists to meet this new reality will require practical education in several key elements.

If the expanded role of the evangelists is “...to prepare God’s people for works of service...”,¹⁰ then it is primarily important to understand what is meant by the term “prepare.” While the NIV uses the word “prepare,” the NASB uses “equipping.” This suggests a slightly broader meaning. A brief summary of the key concepts involved in this work illuminates for us some of what is understood about the equipping task.

1. A Modeling Component

The term “equipping” implies a mentoring and modeling role. Not only are the evangelists to make disciples, but also they are to make other evangelists. The passion for souls found within the heart of an evangelist is best transferred through the life of the evangelist influencing others. Indeed, the evangelistic passion is desperately needed in the Canadian church, and it is the evangelist that God has given as an instrument to fan the flames of burden for the lost. Ravi Zacharias eloquently communicated this concept in 1983 when, at an international gathering for evangelists, he said:

“Yes, it is impossible for you and me to bear the deafening noise of the world’s heartaches; but there is one place in the world where there is an aggregate, an accumulation of human suffering—that is, the heart of God. God then takes some of those heartaches and funnels them down into the hearts of His servants so that they might sense His burden and proclaim His message. This holy anxiety is an indispensable prerequisite to

significant communication.”¹¹

If this “holy anxiety” is necessary, it is to be imparted to all those who are to give witness to the mercy and grace of God.

2. An Instructing Component

Instruction is undoubtedly a major component of the equipping task. For many people it is far easier to do a task than teach a task, but the future success of the local church depends upon people being taught how to lead people to faith in Jesus Christ. While modeling helps to develop people’s hearts, teaching develops their minds. Classes on “how to tell your story,” apologetics, the basics of the Gospel, as well as instruction concerning any of the dozens of different evangelistic programs the local church may engage in (i.e., Alpha, Evangelism Explosion, Quest, Christianity Explained, etc.) are a needed component of the evangelist’s new calling.

3. An Organizing Component

There is also an organizational component that seeks to align the whole of the Church with its evangelistic mandate. The absence of the evangelist within a church is very evident as soon as one looks at a church’s budget. The evangelist’s persistent “pounding of the evangelism drum” at every level of the organization has been missing. The whole church system needs to be influenced by the evangelist, and an ethos of evangelism needs to be engineered into the church’s “DNA”. Why is it that people with the gift of hospitality are immediately shoved into the fellowship committee, when hospitality is a huge entry point for evangelism, especially to internationals? The goal is not simply to begin evangelistic programs; it is a desire to make the Church more conformed in its nature to what God has created Her to be: the physical presence of Jesus on earth. An evangelistically equipped church is not one that simply has programs for reaching the lost and training for people to that end. It is one that embodies the evangelistic heart of God, out of which programs will be developed.

While these three components—modeling, instructing, and organizing—are central to the equipping task, they are by no means all that is involved. They serve only to demonstrate how broad a range the equipping task covers. Furthermore, while at first glance, these components appear merely to address physical realities (technique, structures, actions, and the like), there is a spiritual reality to equipping that runs throughout each component that awakens a deeper evangelistic longing, the result of which feeds the soul so that church members may also say, “I have food to eat that you know nothing about.”¹²

The New Recipients

The second issue is to understand how these components are employed in a local church setting. I would like to suggest four levels of equipping that take place within a local congregation.

1. Equipping at a Personal Level

When it comes to evangelism probably the first thing people think of is personal evangelism. Often this is a skewed characterization which involves “button-holing” and confrontation. This misunderstanding of what evangelism is has led many to reject telling others the Good News because they have a distorted view of how to do it. One of the first

tasks of equipping people for evangelism at the personal level is to clear away the misconceptions regarding evangelism.

Although many are misinformed about evangelism this is only the fruit of the problem. The root lies in a volitional paralysis with regard to evangelism at a personal level. In other words, people are just not willing to grow or learn or practice evangelism as part of their everyday life. There is no will. There is no desire. Somehow people are content to stagnate in this area of their life. There has been a deprioritizing of personal evangelism in their discipleship process. Certainly there are many aspects to a healthy, balanced Christian life. However, not all aspects are equal in priority. While some may argue that evangelism is not the first priority of the Christian life, it can safely be observed that the present prioritization for most is far too low. The tragedy, of course, is that people assume that they can grow in other aspects of their lives while they neglect this primary discipline. Unless evangelism is reprioritized in people's hearts, minds and wills the local church will not see very much fruit and neither will the individual!

Personal evangelism in these new times will require God's people to be able to tell their story as it is written each day by the hand of God. They also need to be able to observe God's story writing in other lives, pointing out where God has been reaching out to them.

2. Equipping at a Program Level

If churches are expecting to attract non-Christians, they have to offer something that is designed especially for them. This may be stating the obvious to some, but it is amazing how few churches actually have a program that is specifically designed for people who do not believe. Is it any wonder the *Alpha* course has seen such dramatic growth and effectiveness in churches. Here's a program designed with the seeker in mind. My suspicion is that this is the same reason for the phenomenal success and growth in seeker services. But it will be a sad ignorance on the church's part if they assume that offering seeker-oriented programs is the full extent of what they can offer. One statistic has said that only 10% of the population are actually "seekers." The vast majority could care less about finding answers about God, Jesus, and the Bible. If we are going to create any sense of curiosity within those who are disinterested, we need to offer multi-dimensional programs. Multi-dimensional programs are designed to meet specific felt needs of those who are uninterested in the Gospel, but which offers evangelistic "sound bites" in its presentation which will whet the appetite for more. An example would be offering a program to the community on how to build your child's self esteem. Throughout the course the importance of having a life foundation which provides self-worth, dignity, and value could be stressed so that people begin to ask, "Where do I get my sense of value, worth, and dignity?" Just getting them to ask some of the right questions is moving them toward the right direction.

Ideally these multi-dimensional courses are offered "off-site." The congregation that believes it can fulfill its evangelistic mandate without getting out of the church building is out of touch with where many non-Christians are. For some non-Christians the building itself is anathema.

3. Equipping at a Perception Level

The average non-Christian does not perceive the church in a positive light. At best they are indifferent. Ask people on the street what they think of the church and many will have

a horror story to tell. How far we have come from Paul's injunction that those who are followers of Christ are to guard how they live "...so that in every way they will make the teaching about God our Savior attractive."¹³ North American Christians are now reaping the fruit of our negative image by being the brunt of jokes, teasing, and worse. Unless the church is making inroads into the community to build a positive reputation it will never reach the vast majority of people. The local church needs to be involved in community events—the parties, the parades, the sidewalk sales, the community fund-raisers, the city clean-ups—events that give the local church a reputation that tells the community that it cares about those things that are important to them. At the same time the church can seek to add some salt and light to these activities.

The goal of the local church at the perception level is two-fold: to give non-Christians a positive experience with Christianity; to create curiosity within those who could care less. Although there are some churches that do well with moving seekers forward in their spiritual journey, there are very few that do well at helping non-seekers move forward in their spiritual journey. Obviously this is a difficult task, and yet with God's help it is possible to raise the curiosity quotient within people.

4. Equipping at a Principle Level¹⁴

Equipping the Church at the principle level will take much time and will likely be the most difficult to implement. By “principle,” I mean a governing evangelistic conviction that guides the local church and provides the basis for action and decisions. Simply addressing issues in the church constitution will not address the root of many of these forces. Neither is it simply a matter of having a written purpose or mission statement. It is a matter of changing attitudes and habits of many years. It will take a momentous paradigm shift for many churches and will require a vigilant, persevering, uncompromising consistency to prevent these old traditions from returning. For example, a church may hear about the *Alpha* course. There is great initial enthusiasm, money is spent, energy is expended, and many church members attend the first session. However, after the initial spark, a few months later, the ministry has folded and all they have to show for it is less money in their bank account, burned out volunteers, and a reinforced perception that says, “We can’t do evangelism.” The problem is not necessarily the program. What is involved are powerful systemic forces that are resistant to change. In order to change the systemic nature of a church there are at least three concepts that need to be grappled with.

Wholeness—Dealing with the Big Picture

Wholeness relates to the basic idea that the different parts that compose the system form a single organic whole that can be seen as such even though the parts are still distinguishable. The question that needs to be asked with regard to evangelism is, “What are we like as a congregation?” A congregation may be casual, formal, wounded, aggressive, timid, critical, energetic, directionless, cynical, or tired. Wholeness deals with “as we are,” and not, “as we are perceived.” Having ascertained what the congregation is like we can then allow harder questions; such as, “Are we healthy?”, “Are we attractive?”, and “Are we relevant to our community?”

Wholeness not only looks at who we are in the present, it looks to the past to find out if there are unresolved tensions that still need to be dealt with; corporate sins that need to be repented of.

Finally, wholeness looks at defining moments in the life of a church. What were the watershed issues that defined what the church is like? These things have helped to create the DNA of the present congregation. These stories help to define the church's self image. Tell the stories that positively build up the church.

Synergy—Dealing with the Individual Parts

The principle of synergy necessitates asking the question, "Are we all pointing the same way?" Of course this implies that there is a clear direction in which a church is headed. This is where the value of a vision statement lies. However, too often the vision statement does not have power to redirect wandering ministries.

Similarly there needs to be an alignment between the ministries and the values. If one of the values is that lost people matter to God, and yet the language of a church and focus of the ministry excludes lost people, the evangelistic effectiveness is sabotaged. Imagine going to a church as a seeker, having never been to church before, and the leader announces, "If you would like to know more about Christianity, you can take our *Alpha* course; just see Jane in the narthex following the doxology."

Synergy also invites us to look at our organizational structure and our constitution. If numeric growth is part of what a church desires, the question that needs to be asked is: "Does the way we are governed allow for growth?" A good exercise is to go through the constitution and ask, "If the church were double its present size, how would it affect the constitution?" If the constitution does not meet the needs of growth, it needs to be addressed.

Correspondence—Dealing with Community

Correspondence has to do with the church's ability to relate to the community it is in. Evangelism is largely a matter of discernment. Knowing the community in which God has set it and discerning the true needs is essential to developing a ministry that corresponds to those needs. The culture of a church and the context of the society determine the concept for evangelism. In his book, *Reaching a New Generation*, Al Roxburgh makes this statement: "The mission strategy for each congregation must, increasingly, be shaped by the values, needs and style of its context. In pluralistic cultures there are a wide variety of values which can change from neighbourhood to neighbourhood."¹⁵ Clearly the future of evangelism must be contextualized to neighbourhoods, not simply countries or provinces.

An evangelism program that is simply imported and expected to work is being set up for failure. There needs to be some personal tailoring in order to make it fit the community. And sometimes the suit just won't feel comfortable to the community no matter what kind of tailoring is done.

Correspondence also has to do with the message we say and the message we send. Communication is not simply verbal; a very high percent of communication is non-verbal. We need to understand how our intended communication is being perceived. If we are trying to communicate that we serve a God that is worthy of all our praise, that we would lay down our lives for Him, and yet people know that as a church we fight over the style of music we play on Sunday, what we are communicating is that God is not that worthy; because forget "laying down our lives," we won't even "lay down" our musical preferences. If we say "all welcome," but tow cars that don't have a church sticker, there is no

correspondence between words and actions.

Correspondence has also to do with leadership. The saying is true, “speed of the leader, speed of the team.” A minister who simply says, “We need to share our faith,” but never shares his own faith, is crippling the evangelistic effort. If the leadership of the church is seen as a holy huddle that doesn’t have friendships with unchurched people, their people will imitate their way of life.

The New Scope

A final consideration for training evangelists will be the increased scope of their concern. There is now a need for the evangelist to see the arm of their evangelistic influence lengthening into areas not traditionally considered in bounds for evangelists. Three examples will have to suffice.

1. Evangelism/Discipleship

There was, in the past, a somewhat arbitrary and assumed division between evangelism and discipleship. The evangelist worked with non-Christians to bring them to faith, then the pastor would take over the work of discipleship. The problem is that there are many non-Christians who need to be shepherded by a pastor, and much discipleship is not grounded in an evangelistic foundation. The lines that divided the roles have now merged.

The evangelistic task is foundational to discipleship. In I Timothy 4:16, Paul exhorts Timothy, “*Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers.*” The work of theology, “watching doctrine,” is undergirded by an evangelistic motive. In Philemon 6, the connection between Christian growth in “understanding every good thing we have in Christ” is conditional upon being active in sharing one’s faith. In I Corinthians 2:1-2, Paul explains that when he came to this pagan city to preach, his motivation in proclaiming was so that he might know Christ. In fact, that was his only resolve when he was among them (he didn’t say his motivation was to create converts). Growing in a knowledge of Christ is intimately linked to evangelism, and the evangelist needs to understand his task and the importance of his influence in the discipleship process.

2. Proclamation/Incarnation

The means of proclamation of the traditional evangelist has been the crafting of words to convey a message that will communicate meaningfully to the recipients in order to bring them to faith and repentance. A favorite passage used to inform this position is Romans 10:14, “How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?”

The scope of proclamation needs to be extended to see that it is not only dealing with the auditory senses but also with the tactile and visual. The patient crafting of a congregation by an evangelist is needed so that the Gospel can be felt and seen in the community. How many of the physical healings of Jesus utilized not only words, but also touch? The spiritual healing of souls needs this intertwining of multiple sensory communication. Paul says of the Thessalonian church that their faith in God had become known everywhere and that the Lord’s message “rang out from them” so that he “did not need to say anything.” The Thessalonian church’s reputation itself resulted in the spreading of the Gospel as it was

reported how, “they turned from idols to serving the living and true God, and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead — Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.”¹⁶ This message was modeled by a community. This, too, is a means of proclamation to which the evangelist must see his scope extending.

3. A Static Point in Time/Dynamic Process

The scope of evangelism’s goal needs to stretch to become less constricted. Somehow we have managed to take the dynamic nature of the Gospel and make it static. It has become a four spiritual laws: three steps to peace with God; two things you should know; one-size-fits-all formula. Perhaps in the certainty of modernism this type of breakdown was helpful; now it has become stale.

We have somehow communicated that the conversion act is climaxed by a “sinner’s prayer.” All too often these “magic words” are used as license for an all-too-unregenerate lifestyle. Shouldn’t the climax of conversion be the reception of the Holy Spirit and the fruit of a changed life? Hasn’t God invited us into a covenant which shakes the foundations of our life? Are we not appealing for the very souls *and bodies* of people to be offered in sacrifice to God rather than a simple prayer of confession? Although this was once understood by those who wrote and used evangelistic tracts, it has become deemed secondary to the competitive get-a-decision mentality that has now reared its head in some evangelistic organizations. Perhaps this accounts for why so few of those who make a decision in mass evangelism actually get plugged into a local worshipping congregation. While the decision to accept Christ’s sacrifice as the sole source of salvation from God’s wrath toward sin is a key step in the journey toward God, there is a continual working out of our salvation that is also important to the process so that people do not fall away. The scope of the evangelist’s efforts encourages a continual advancing toward God, regardless of how far along in the process the person has journeyed.

Conclusion

Please understand, I am not saying that the way evangelists have done things in the past was wrong, but the reality is that people’s needs and the needs of the church are changing. While there is a greater hunger for spirituality, there is also less Biblical literacy. There is a greater longing for relational experiences, but there is mistrust of formal organizations. What was right and competent in the past is insufficient to carry us effectively into the future. While the church experienced a greater health during the past century, the evangelist was strategically placed as a proclaimer of Good News. Now the anemic state of local church health compels the evangelist to equip the local church with the desire, ways, and means for effectively bringing the Good News to her neighbours.

My hope is that some may catch a glimmer of the potential influence evangelists could have on the local church and strive to see it realized. While the Gospel message is unchanging, the means and strategy for making it known is as dynamic as the God who gave it. It may well be that the future of the church leans now most heavily upon the evangelist, to restore to Her the evangelistic *raison d’être* that God intended.

Bibliography:

Author Info

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Chapter Discussion Questions:

1. Do you think the equipping mandate of the evangelist has been adequately carried out in the past? Why or why not?
2. It is argued part of the role of the evangelist is to “to nurture the evangelism concepts that are birthed from the congregation itself.” Why do you think this important?
3. What hurdles will need to be overcome before the role of equipping evangelist is embraced in local congregations?
4. Equipping at a “principle level... will likely be the most difficult to implement.” Why do you think this is so and what will be required to bring such change about?

Further Reading

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Chapter Notes

¹ Since this chapter is meant to focus upon the training of a new type of evangelist for a post-modern Canada, and not upon the nature of post modernism itself, I have assumed a general knowledge of post-modernism on the part of the reader. Those wishing to do some further reading in the area of post-modernism may want to consult some of the works I have listed in the bibliography.

² For the purposes of this chapter the male pronoun will be used; this is not intended to give the impression that the calling of the evangelists is limited to the male gender.

³ While using a term—like “non-Christian”—which labels people by what they are not is certainly less than ideal, I have been unable to find a term that sounds less pejorative. For this reason, I have elected to use a term that is admittedly second best.

⁴ Romans 10:17 clearly links faith with hearing and it is not my intention to suggest that a Christian presence is all that is needed to help give birth to faith.

⁵ Billy Graham, *Just As I Am* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), p. 695. (Interestingly, the emphasis of the Billy Graham organization has moved increasingly toward an equipping emphasis, with schools of evangelism and the Lausanne conferences as two examples.)

⁶ J.B. Phillips, *Letters to Young churches*, a translation of the New Testament Epistles (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1953) Ephesians 4:11, italics mine.

⁷ Ephesians 4:12 NIV.

⁸ John 21:17 (Italics mine).

⁹ Alan Walker, cited in *How to reach Secular People*, George G. Hunter III, Pg. 24.

¹⁰ Ephesians 4:12.

¹¹ Zacharias, Ravi K. “The Evangelist’s Appeal to Those of Other Faiths: We Call People From Among All the Nations” in *The Work Of an Evangelist* (World Wide Publications 1984) p. 102.

¹² John 4:32. Here, Jesus gains spiritual sustenance from an evangelistic encounter.

¹³ Titus 2:10.

¹⁴ For much of this section dealing with equipping at a principle level, I have leaned heavily upon the work of Paul Stephens and Phil Collins’ book *The Equipping Pastor*.

¹⁵ Alan Roxburgh, *Reaching a New Generation for Christ* p.

¹⁶ I Thessalonians 1:7-10.
