

The Decline of Mass Evangelism

Mass evangelism crusades are seldom used anymore—and for good reason. The best evangelism is simpler, quieter, more personal—and more Biblical.

“...That you may become blameless and harmless, children of God without fault in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, holding fast the word of life...” (Phil. 2:15-16).



Throughout the post-WWII years (the 1950s, 60s, and 70s), many evangelical denominations organized huge city-wide evangelism crusades to get their message of salvation out to sinners. These events featured prominent speakers, such as Billy Graham, who confronted the lost with their need for a Savior. In each city, large sums of money were solicited from dozens of churches to rent stadiums and purchase advertising. Thousands of people turned out for these events, often attracting media attention. The sight of hundreds of people responding to altar calls made for compelling evidence: Mass evangelism works! Even churches of Christ jumped on this bandwagon, organizing “Campaigns for Christ” that harnessed the resources of local churches to present a more accurate gospel message to their communities. Bigger is better!

By the mid-80s, however, the effectiveness of these efforts was being called into question. One researcher, Elmer Towns, provided a stark assessment of what was really happening. He wrote:

“For all the massive budgets, publicity, organized outreach, and numerous decisions, mass evangelism had comparatively small results for the cooperating churches. In many cases, there were no results, but actually a decline in church membership in cities where mass evangelistic crusades were held. Why? Because citywide crusades siphoned off money and evangelistic efforts for the local church, so that membership went down, rather than up. ...What we have found by statistical verification [is that] local church evangelism is the most effective way to reach the lost” (“Evangelism: Hot as Ever, but Old Methods Are Cooling Off,” *Fundamentalist Journal*, February 1984).

What these churches learned by experience could have been gleaned from the pages of the New Testament at much less cost. Evangelism in the first century was a more low-profile endeavor, emphasizing individuals and relationships. The church at Philippi, for example, was started not by a mass campaign by The Great Apostle Paul, but with a casual riverside meeting with a Jewish businesswoman, followed by a conversation with the local jailor’s family in their house (read Acts 16 for details). As the little group grew, Paul encouraged them to remain “lights in the world, holding fast the word of life.” Their best chance of reaching their city with the gospel was by simply living that message in their daily lives. Their neighbors and co-workers would be attracted to the story of Jesus as they saw the transformative power of the gospel among the local disciples of Christ. Christianity spread throughout the Roman Empire that way, like leaven quietly penetrating a lump of dough (Matt. 13:33). Do you suppose Jesus knew something we don’t?

Ever since the tower of Babel, humans have been infatuated with the big, the sensational, the splashy, the dazzling—whatever it takes to grab the attention of the crowds. But these monuments to human pride never last long, and often end up doing more harm than good. Instead of erecting these elaborate schemes to leverage the resources of churches on a city-wide or world-wide scale, we should concentrate our efforts where they will do the most good: on training members of the local congregation in how to cultivate relationships in their own community. It’s more effective that way. And more importantly, the Lord gets the glory, not us.

— David King