

How the Process of Evangelism Is Changing

October 5, 2021

by Dr. James Emery White, senior pastor of Mecklenburg Community Church in Charlotte, NC.



A Post-Christian Culture Requires a Different Approach

One of the most important realities to grasp as it pertains to evangelism is that it must involve both *process* and *event*, not simply an *event*. In earlier eras, evangelism was almost entirely treated as an event. Meaning, **you presented the gospel and called for a decision**. And that was all there was to evangelism. This was the era of Sunday school and door-to-door visitation, busing, and revivals. All were largely event-oriented approaches, giving a cold-call presentation and asking for an immediate decision. **And it often worked.**

Q1. What did Dr. White mean by event-oriented cold-call evangelistic approaches of the past? What do you think is the benefit and weakness of this approach?

But as our culture became increasingly post-Christian and individuals became increasingly divorced from any type of spiritual literacy, there was an increasing need for evangelism to involve **both process and event**. Meaning, **investing in and facilitating someone's journey down the line of faith (process) to that point in time when they have gained enough answers and enough literacy to responsibly consider their response to it all (event)**.

Q2. In your own words, what did Dr. White mean by process-oriented evangelistic approaches?

I've often sketched it out as a line from one to 10, with one representing someone as far away from God as possible, and 10 representing the moment when they come to saving faith and knowledge. I then make the case that we used to have a culture in which people sat on about an eight on the scale.



There was so much they brought to the table:

- a belief that truth existed;
- a belief that God existed;
- a basic embrace of the Judeo-Christian value system with a built-in sense of guilt and conviction when they violated it;
- usually a positive background in the life of the church and respect for her leaders.

When people are sitting on an eight, you don't need much more than event-oriented approaches. They're not on an eight anymore. They are, at best, sitting on a three.



That means there now needs to be fresh attention paid to moving them from a three to an eight, where they can begin to responsibly engage the call to decide. And it is precisely that process that has recently changed.

Q3. What are the differences between today's unchurched in comparison to the past?

For many of Mecklenburg Community Church's formative years, the typical unchurched person

who encountered our church would have considered themselves a Christian.

This made the evangelistic process interesting:

- 1) They came thinking they were a Christian;
- 2) They learned over the ensuing months that they were actually not a Christian, largely by learning what crossing the line of faith truly means and what life on the other side entails;
- 3) and Periodic “decision” challenges to cross the line of faith were continually met with acceptance by those who were ready in light of their journey. In short, they came thinking they were a Christian, found out they weren’t, and then we helped them truly cross the line.

That’s changed.

Here is the process now:

- 1) They come thinking they have rejected Christianity;
- 2) They learn over ensuing months they really haven’t—rather, they had been embracing caricatures and misinformation, or rejecting representations of the Christian faith that were not true to Jesus; and
- 3) We are then able to introduce them to the real thing. Again, in short, they come thinking they are not a Christian, we tell them we reject what they tend to reject, too, and then we cast the vision of what the Christian faith and life in Christ actually entail.

Q4. *In your own words, how has the process for evangelism changed at Dr. White’s church?*

Q5. *In what ways do churches need to update their evangelism process to culture?*

Interestingly, while there are two vastly different starting points, the process itself is still built around the same two dynamics: **explanation** and **incarnation**. The explanation of authentic

faith, and the collective incarnation of authentic faith—in a way that is both winsome and compelling—propels people down the line.

This simple idea that evangelism is **both process and event**, and that we must pay fresh attention in our day to the process aspect, is one I wish more church leaders embraced. Because while many know how to lead someone across the line, they aren’t serving the process of getting them to the line itself.

Q6. *What are some possible ways that evangelism today can be both a process and an event? How does apologetics aid process?*

1 Chronicles 12:32 NLT

“From the tribe of Issachar, there were 200 leaders of the tribe with their relatives. All these men understood the signs of the times and knew the best course for Israel to take.”

Q7. *What do you think it means that the tribe of Issachar understood the signs of the times? What knowledge did they have? How is this needed in today’s evangelism efforts?*

Colossians 4:2-6 NLT

“2 Devote yourselves to prayer with an alert mind and a thankful heart. 3 Pray for us, too, that God will give us many opportunities to speak about his mysterious plan concerning Christ. That is why I am here in chains. 4 Pray that I will proclaim this message as clearly as I should. 5 Live wisely among those who are not believers, and make the most of every opportunity. 6 Let your conversation be gracious and attractive so that you will have the right response for everyone.”

Q8. *What do you observe from Colossians 4:2-6 that is needed in our attempts to reach the lost?*