

CHAPTER 7

UNAFRAID WITNESS

Say It in a Sentence: Clear, direct witness to others about my own relationship with Jesus Christ brings the glory down (2 Corinthians 2:14–17).

Have you heard of the Black Plague that by the seventeenth century nearly engulfed the European continent? The disease can be traced in the death toll.

- In May 1664, there were just a few cases reported in England.
- In May 1665, 590 people died.
- In July 1665, just two months later, 17,000 mysteriously dropped dead.
- One month later, 31,000 died.

More than 100 million people died in the pandemic, including nearly half of great cities like Paris and London. The Black Plague decimated the population and altered the course of world history. They called it “black” for two reasons: the black splotches caused by swelling nodes and internal bleeding, and also because of the shadow of confusion. Not knowing the cause of death, it seemed as though a mysterious shadow would randomly fall like an executioner’s ax, leaving the people absolutely terrified.¹ “*What is happening?*” Can you imagine, members of your family are dying, and you have no idea of the cause? Crossing the continent like a tsunami, people ran from their homes in hysteria. Medicine was so steeped in suspicion that doctors recommended breathing the aroma of flowers and carrying petals in your pockets in the hopes that breathing something good would displace what was causing the carnage. Covered in black oozing splotches, the dying in hospital beds were spooned ashes to induce coughing in hopes of spewing the secret source of slaughter. Historians pieced together that the disease was borne by rats riding in crates from the Middle East. Fleas from those rats bit humans, who spread the plague to others through the very coughing doctors were inducing. A lasting relic from that terror is the macabre children’s rhyme detailing remedies that did not work:

Ring around the roses,
A pocket full of posies,
Ashes, ashes,
We all fall down.

We began this book with a biblical and sociological study of the universal longing in every human heart. Though most cannot articulate what they want, it is a longing for eternity, for transcendence, for an experience outside the boundaries of normal human knowing. This longing installed in us by Creator God cannot be satisfied or suppressed by any aroma of

human experience. Sexual experimentation and substance abuse only make us sicker. Spoonfuls of status or acquiring stuff to satiate this hunger lead inevitably to vomiting up what we foolishly ingest as we search in vain for fulfillment. All around us, people report the same searching but the inability to find it and the spewing that follows every failed attempt until “we all fall down.”

MY FEAR AS A CHURCH PLANTER

Vertical Church is the furthest thing from a cloistered community reveling in the God they have found through Jesus Christ while those where they live and work are covered in black splotches. From the furnace of manifest presence, born of unashamed adoration and unapologetic preaching, comes an army of worshippers unafraid in their witness, determined to see others discover what they have found in the LORD.

Though my wife and mother-in-law were reached through the Baptist church I grew up in, most of the baptisms we witnessed were the children of those already attending, just a trickle of people annually. A few more were reached through bus ministry, but the “every-week invitation” for salvation mostly saw the same people walking forward in their dysfunction or the occasional straggler making a first-time decision to follow Jesus. This is typical in the church today, with less than 2 percent per-year believer baptisms.² With that as my experience base, the last thing Kathy and I wanted was to plant a church. Anyone I had ever known who planted a church spent ten years meeting around a card table with ten people, subsisting on \$10,000 annually, until they gave up. I had never been part of a ministry that was abundantly fruitful evangelistically, and I feared the same for myself.

Further, I dreaded the idea of pastoring down the street from the original seeker church, Willow Creek, where pastors from around the world were flocking to learn methods for people-reaching that contradicted my

most deeply held convictions.³ It seemed safer to start with a sustainable-sized congregation in some anonymous location. I saw myself preaching the Word but with only a vague idea of how people outside our well-fed congregation would find Jesus. In 1988, I had no reason to believe or any way of knowing that I would pastor a church baptizing more than a thousand adults annually in recent years and spreading like wildfire through global church plants that also experience a flood of fresh conversions to Christ. But I am getting ahead of myself.

THE KEY WORD IS *BOLDNESS*

Back in August 1988, I sat in the chair previously described and typed into my now-antiquated Macintosh Plus computer what would become our pillar on evangelism. Before I began, I opened my Bible to the book of Acts. Not to study the message of the gospel but the manner in which the apostles presented it. Before we review those passages, let's get the key word defined. Contrary to popular opinion, God has done more than give us good news He wants to get out. He has given us a manner that must accompany every method and a rationale for that manner.

The single term that best describes the way God wants His gospel given is *boldness*. And because it's translated various ways, even faithful students of Scripture might overlook its frequency. *Boldness (parrhesia)* is used forty-two times in the New Testament. It is translated "openly," "freely," "plainly," "with confidence" but most commonly some form of the word "bold." A bold witness is not a pushy witness. A bold witness is not a loud witness, unless it needs to be. Boldness is not obnoxiousness. It's not rude or demanding. Boldness is the furthest thing from some wild-eyed preacher screeching in the streets, "You're going to hell!" Boldness is clear, direct communication in the face of potential opposition, nothing more or less. According to Proverbs 28:1, it is a characteristic of God's children: "**The**

wicked flee when no one pursues, but the righteous are bold as a lion.”

Are you bold for Christ?

- Acts 2:29, Peter: **“Brothers, I may say to you with confidence ...”** (same word). Convinced that Jesus Christ is the only hope for a fallen humanity, why wouldn’t Peter be confident in his words of witness about Jesus? It’s time to stop with the “aw-shucks” approach to speaking about Jesus and open our mouths boldly. When Peter gave the message with boldness on the day of Pentecost, three thousand were added to the church.
- In Acts 4, the pattern of bold gospel work is repeated. The religious leaders were **“greatly annoyed”** at the apostles for **“proclaiming ... Jesus,”** so they threw them in prison, but their boldness was blessed, because **“the number of the [saved] men came to about five thousand.”**⁴ Retaliating with restrictions and threats, they demanded of Peter and John, **“By what power or by what name did you do this?”**⁵ Interesting that Peter responded, not with a softer tone, but with another sermon holding them responsible for the death of Jesus and pressing on their points of sensitivity eight times in three verses. The apostles’ boldness concluded with the singularity of Christ’s salvation offer: **“No one else ... no other name ... must be saved.”**⁶
- Just weeks before Peter had been fearful before a servant girl, denying Jesus to save face with some fireside strangers; but now with the Holy Spirit controlling his words, he would not be silenced before the Jewish Supreme Court. In a few sentences he took their accusation and turned it around. Don’t miss the response of those who heard, because it wasn’t about Peter’s message or Peter’s miracle; it was about Peter’s *manner* of speaking, **“Now when they saw the boldness of Peter ... they were astonished.”**⁷

- At this point the religious leaders retired to executive session to come up with a strategy. **“What shall we do with these men?”** Unable to deny what was happening, **“they ... charged them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus.”**⁸ Good luck! Peter and John left them with just one question: Should we obey you or God? Saying in effect, “You’re asking the impossible!” You might as well ask the sun to stop shining and the earth to stop turning, because **“we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard.”**⁹ That’s boldness—I simply cannot stop speaking about what Jesus Christ has done for me.
- Back at the ranch, they got with all the other “outlaw Christians” and started to pray. Did they pray for church members who were sick? Did they pray for a facility to house the growing congregation? Surely they petitioned God’s protection from the religious bullies? No, they asked the Lord to **“grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness.”**¹⁰ Wow, how determined they were not to be silenced about Jesus no matter the threat. And how easily the threat of negative response muzzles our witness today.

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OBJECTIONS TO BOLDNESS

Some suggest that boldness is a matter of personality or preference, not binding on all Christians for all time. Paul, however, clarified that boldness isn’t just a good way; it’s the right

way, the God way, the biblical method for talking to people about Jesus. To the Ephesians, Paul disclosed his fear that he would fail in what God required, saying, “[Pray] for me ... that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak.”¹¹ Others will say that they prefer the method of Christ Himself, whose distinguishing characteristic was ... say, gentleness or probing questions. In reality, the disciples learned their boldness from watching Jesus’ boldness.

Jesus taught that boldness means speaking plainly: “And [Jesus] began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again. And he said this *plainly*.”¹²

That word *plainly* is the same one translated in other places as *boldness*. Boldness is simply speaking the gospel plainly. How many Christians fear to speak for Jesus because they think they need eloquence when plainness of speech is all God needs: “God loves you. Jesus Christ died for you. He can change your life. He did it for me. He will do it for you.” That’s the garden-variety, plain-old, blue-jean boldness God blesses.

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Jesus taught that boldness means speaking openly: “Some of the people of Jerusalem therefore said, ‘Is not this the man whom they seek to kill? And here he is, speaking *openly*.’”¹³ Hide it under a bushel? No! Again

the word *boldness*, but here it's the idea of freely expressing truth as you see it. It's not preachy, arrogant, or force-feeding anything. Boldness is the way you would talk to someone with an urgent message. If you were vacating a building because there was a fire on your floor and you met some people in the lobby from your office walking toward the elevator, *you wouldn't hesitate for a second to freely express the danger of going in the wrong direction.* You would know they were unaware and would never consider withholding something so obviously needed and unknown to them.

*Jesus also taught that boldness means speaking clearly: "The hour is coming when I will no longer speak to you in figures of speech but will tell you plainly."*¹⁴ Again it's the same word, *boldness*; Jesus was declaring a time when figures of speech would be set aside in favor of plain, open, clear communication. That time is now!

But some will say, "Bold witness just turns people off, and we don't want that." In reality a negative reaction to talking about the gospel cannot and should not be avoided. Here's why.

"YOU STINK!" IS UNAVOIDABLE

In speaking about this gospel and our witness to it, Paul said Christians are **"the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance of life to life."**¹⁵ Paul's point to the Corinthians and to all of us is that you can't have it both ways. If you are going to be used by God as a witness to the gospel, you are going to stink to some who don't see it no matter what.

This reality appears in the news every week. Jesus Christ is the aroma of death to those who are perishing. Jesus is reviled as mental illness by politicians on the left and randomly revered on the right by those who wish to ride His coattails. Derided by the news media and denied by the moral left, Jesus

Christ seems batted about by everyone at times. Why the hatred for Jesus Christ? You will never attend a movie and hear Buddha or Muhammad used as a curse word. Artists funded by the National Endowment for the Arts won't picture Gandhi in a pool of urine or Hare Krishna engaged in a homosexual act. Yet artists portray Jesus Christ this way, funded by our tax dollars and defended by the Supreme Court. This hatred for Jesus Christ has become pathetically predictable and is disturbingly irrational. Most importantly, it is *unavoidable*. Christ is a stench to those who are perishing, and we are that stench too. Here's the point: unless you are willing to be the aroma of death to those who are perishing, you will never be the aroma of life to those who are being saved. How much of the programmed evangelism in horizontal church flows from trying to avoid what cannot be avoided.

Vertical Church runs past all the baseball leagues, barbeques, and bake sales established for the bait-and-switch of building relationships as a long bridge to Jesus. Surely these approaches reach a few over a long period, but I challenge you to cut to the chase literally and look for the people who don't need all that. Are methods built around influencing over months and years the people *we want to reach really best*? More importantly, shouldn't we also be looking for the people *God is reaching now*? **“Look, I tell you, lift up**

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your eyes, and see that the fields are white for harvest.¹⁶ Vertical Church evangelism sets aside the methods we invented to make evangelism easier for people who don't want to do it and gets back to what stokes the fire of people so they will want to witness. The apostles didn't displace their fear of rejection with methods that avoided offense and made the lost comfortable; they displaced their fear of rejection with authentic passion for Jesus burning in their hearts. Theirs was a passion fanned into flame in church by frequent Vertical encounters with God's manifest glory.

When we view ourselves as the key ingredient in *if* a person comes to Christ, our method drifts far from the shore of biblical boldness. We may suffer, but we will reach more, and we should not want it any other way. Attempting to avoid rejection, we have created horizontal methods that aim to navigate around hostile response. Is it right that we should expect better results than faithful saints of God through the ages? Let's embrace the expectation that we will not be treated better than the early disciples when we share Christ the way they did. In Vertical Church, we want God most of all and gladly bear the reproach that comes with bold witness to our faith in Jesus, **“rejoicing that [we] were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name.”**¹⁷ God wants the message of salvation given plainly, openly, clearly, *boldly* because that is the method that protects us from becoming **peddlers.**¹⁸

WHY GOD WANTS OUR BOLDNESS

Covered at length in the first half of this book was the biblical rationale for placing doxology above soteriology. Evangelism happens naturally and easily as a by-product of a church focused on the glory of God. When that Vertical mission is lost, we settle into a human-centered approach to evangelism so common in the North American church, where things that would have seemed outrageous in the name of reaching people are

now commonplace. When the church becomes a circus, concert venue, or a clown show, God is long gone, glory doesn't come down, and we are left with the performance we put on to tell people about a God they will never experience personally. Saddest is when the hype of the show substitutes glitter for glory and people forget the difference between vibe and Vertical.

I understand that good church leaders reading this book need to believe they are not abandoning but actually accelerating the work of evangelism by going 100 percent Vertical, so stick with me; I hope to prove that to you. Far from settling for less, we are setting our sail to reach more when we make the choice to go Vertical. More authentic conversions, more flame-throwing followers of Jesus than you have ever seen before. Foundational to that choice must be the confidence that **“salvation belongs to the LORD,”** that it's **“God [who gives] the growth,”** and **“as many as were appointed to eternal life believed.”**¹⁹ If you truly embrace the countless scriptures that affirm salvation as a work only God can do, then you are freed up to ask why He is not doing it more through you. Again, the overriding question in Vertical Church is not *how can we be more effective in working for God*, but, *how can we remove the barriers that prevent God from doing what we know He desires?* **“For we are not, like so many, peddlers of God's word.”**²⁰

Even in Paul's day, they were using techniques to avoid being the aroma of death to people. *“If I target someone and share Christ boldly, it makes them upset. So I've got to find an approach that doesn't upset anyone.”* That is the thinking that makes people **“peddlers of God's word.”** *Peddler* means a “huckster” or a “hawker” and has the idea of withholding information or distorting facts to convince someone. God doesn't want us to talk about Jesus like a used-car salesman in a plaid suit. He doesn't want us selling Jesus like a late-night infomercial promising a tonic that will cure baldness.²¹ We grimace at the comparison, because we recognize immediately that the manner of communication can greatly cheapen the message.

God commands boldness because it's the only manner of speaking about Jesus that comes from the overflow of our love for Him. **“Now when [the rulers and elders] saw the boldness of Peter and John, ... they were astonished. And they recognized that they had been with Jesus.”**²² A

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bold witness speaks out of personal experience, so it is unafraid. Unafraid of how others will view me. Unafraid if people reject me. Unafraid of all but God, whom I hear saying, *“Don't peddle My Son. He's not damaged goods, and you're just My mouthpiece. You don't have to cheapen the message with your cleverness. It's free and eternal but not for everyone. Just give it out boldly; I will decide who responds.”* That's why Paul called such peddling **“disgraceful, underhanded ways,”** challenging us to put horizontal methods aside: **“we have renounced”** them.²³ Don't peddle the gospel! Don't sneak up on people. Don't be subtle, clever, or even strategic. Just be

plain, and simple, direct, sincere, open, and bold. Are we possibly blind to ways we might be peddling the gospel? Am I? Are you?

Watch out for the following time-tested, dishonest ways of sharing the gospel—techniques of human persuasion in our day:

- **Relational Gospel—receive Christ because we are friends.**

Popularized in the 1970s by the book *Friendship Evangelism*, this method has been so broadly circulated in the Western world that it is considered to be irrefutably effective. Make friends. Take them to baseball games. Wait for them to drop their guard and count you a confidant. Then somewhere down the road, a week, a month, a year, a decade from now, you will earn the right to share Christ and maybe they will be saved, but either way you won't lose the relationship. In the thousands of baptisms we have witnessed, I cannot recall hearing the "friendship evangelism" story. Oh sure, "Somebody invited me to church," or, "A friend reached out in my time of need and shared the gospel"; I have heard countless versions of those. But the "Jesus guy sees stranger, befriends him or her for the purpose of sharing Christ, earns the right through extended servanthood and exemplary love over long period of time, so that stranger, facing no personal crisis of any kind, jumps off the ship of selfishness and chooses Jesus just because of the compelling example of Jesus guy"—that one I haven't heard. I am not saying it's never happened. I *am* saying it's not typical, it's not biblical, it's not bold, and it's not working very well in the Western church. The power of the gospel is not in the relational capacity of the witness but in the message itself. Friendship evangelism, lifestyle evangelism, relational evangelism—all of it flows from our desire to avoid what cannot be avoided. I will say it again, if you are not willing to be the aroma of death to those who are perishing, you can't be the aroma of life to those who are being saved. The idea of having conversations with a person for months or years to "earn the right" to talk to him or her about Jesus betrays an elevation of

the role of human persuasion in evangelism that just doesn't square with the Gospels or the book of Acts. Now, I'm not talking about *enemy evangelism*. Of course we should be kind and live a life of integrity and be sensitive to the Spirit about when to speak up boldly, but bottom line, it's not *about* you.

- **Renown Gospel—receive Christ because impressive people do.**

In this method a person, or more likely a public figure whose fame has been lagging of late, will profess faith in Christ and experience a surge in popularity as churches seek to capitalize on the person's fame and boost attendance by having him or her speak. Sadly, the sudden rise to Christian celebrity status takes the novice convert to places where he or she is vulnerable to disillusionment, and departure from the "Christian phase" comes too often and too quickly. The worst part of this is not the immature believers who feel validated in, say, Bob Dylan's love for Jesus; they seem to recover fine when he says, "That's my religion. I don't adhere to rabbis, preachers, evangelists. I've learned more from the songs than I've learned from any of this kind of entity."²⁴ The worst part is when the people "reached" start "following" Jesus in hopes of picking up some celebrity magic and drop Christ without really knowing Him when the celebrity moves on to another phase.

I remember in youth ministry, a weightlifting team that came to town. They got a few Christian bodybuilders up on stage, bending metal bars in half or breaking ice with their foreheads, and the kids would sit in the audience spellbound. At the end of the show, the guy would say, "And I love Jesus Christ." So a kid thinks to himself, *I'd love to have muscles like that. I'd love to be able to break stuff with my head. Maybe if I had Jesus, I could do that.*

We can't "impress" people into salvation. That is peddling God's Word. It is surely well-intentioned, but it ends up being manipulative and hurtful to kids struggling with sin and all that Jesus came to save us from. Those kids need a bold Holy Spirit appeal to their consciences, not a bait-and-switch "I'm strong and I love Jesus," which implies maybe you could be strong too if you loved Jesus. A faithful witness to the gospel elevates Christ, not His representatives. Jesus doesn't need PR; He needs proclamation. Vertical Church is not about God sitting by and watching us convince people they need Jesus to better their horizontal world. God is the seeker, and when we proclaim Jesus boldly, it provokes Him to show up in saving power and conquer the horizontal idols that hold human hearts.

- **Reasonable Gospel—receive Christ because it makes sense or it's easy.**

Here we confuse simplicity and ease. The message of salvation through faith in Christ is so simple a six-year-old can understand, but it is not easy. Formulaic gospels that oversimplify or intellectualize the gospel can leave the "new convert" in the same old situation, because the darkened heart has never truly been penetrated. When we replace boldness with blandness, we get light on repentance and too quick in delivery. Getting saved isn't a drive-through or a drive-by experience, and Four Spiritual Laws, the Romans Road, Steps to Peace with God that seek to make the gospel accessible run the risk of being superficial. Jesus never hid the cost of following Him, and it is great sin when we do. It's like the personal trainer who says, "Don't run, just walk, not sixty minutes, just thirty, not every day, just two to three times per week." If the workout gets stripped to the place everyone wants in, it has lost its power to

make a person truly fit. We must hold to the simplicity of the gospel without hurrying the decision or hiding the cost. The gospel costs a person everything. Jesus is the celebrated guest at the greatest banquet of all time. Jesus is the treasure hidden in the field. Jesus is the pearl of great price.²⁵

You give up *everything* for Him.

You give up your sin for a Savior.

You give up yourself for a Master.

You give up your hopes and dreams for His eternal purposes.

Choosing to follow Jesus means resigning as chairman of the board of your life and asking Christ to sit at the head of the table. That is not an easy decision and it is not arrived at by rational means alone. **“No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him.”**²⁶ When you see yourself as convincing people to trust Christ, you tend toward leaving out the parts that might hinder your goal, but when you see Jesus as the true messenger and yourself as just a mouthpiece, you are freed up to share the gospel with boldness. **“My speech and my preaching were not with persuasive words of human wisdom ... [Why, Paul?] that your faith should not be in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.”**²⁷

- **Resource Gospel—receive Christ because your life will improve immensely.**

“Don’t you want to be healthy? Don’t you want to be wealthy? Don’t you want to have some piece of paradise here on earth? Jesus Christ is the best investment you will ever make. Put the Son of God in your portfolio, and your life will take off like a rocket.” We have all seen the commercials on television inducing us to buy a vegetable slicer by adding other worthless items: “And even that’s not all. If you order your Vege-omatic in the

next twenty minutes, you will also get this handy-dandy paring knife absolutely free.” Nothing cheapens the message of eternal salvation in Christ more than telling people it comes with a new car. We should be deeply offended by anyone who claims to be a minister of the gospel promising people things God doesn’t promise them.²⁸ Even where “health wealth” has not invaded the church, we can slip into a more subtle version of this error. Jesus Christ promises us a cross to carry, a sword in place of peace, and an exacting accountability for those who claim Him as Lord. Any assuring people of benefits Jesus doesn’t promise or hiding the cost of following Him is a total break with the kind of gospel work revealed in the Gospels themselves.

Each of these erroneous gospel iterations seem to have incubated in the environment of a sincere desire to see people saved, but when we want decisions more than we want disciples, we get tares instead of true converts and Ichabod, departed glory for the church.

DON'T HIDE BEHIND YOUR THEOLOGY

God help us not to peddle the Bible, but sadly I hear some in danger of the opposite extreme saying, *“Aaaaameeeennn, Pastor James, we don’t peddle the Bible over here, no sir, not us, we are serious about our theology.”* For those of you who revel in your record of never sharing Christ unbiblically because you don’t share Him at all, please note the following. **“*Through us [God] spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere.*”**²⁹ Notice **“through us.”** Salvation is of the Lord, just as music is from an artist, and in both cases there is an instrument. It seems that some have built a theology that puts so much responsibility on God that He needs no instrument. After the Damascus road, God declared Saul, who would become history’s

greatest missionary, to be His “**chosen instrument.**”³⁰ Paul described the role as “**we are ambassadors for Christ.**”³¹ When your view of God’s sovereignty has you denying or explaining away Bible content that details our role as His witnesses, you have sailed off the big ocean of biblical belief and into a backwater of rationalized fruitlessness. We are the ones sent “**into all**

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the world.”³² We are the instruments who experience “**God making his appeal through us.**”³³

Preachers who pride themselves on never giving a public invitation to be saved, never calling for a response of any kind, reveal not greater fidelity to the gospel but a lack of faith in its power. We are commanded to “**let down [our] nets for a catch**”³⁴ as “**fishers of men.**”³⁵ When we fail to assist people responding to the gospel at church, we train our people to repeat that failure at home and at work. It’s time to stop the head games and humbly acknowledge

both corporately and individually that God honors some mechanistic expression of “**whosoever will may come.**”³⁶

EVANGELISM BREAKTHROUGH STARTS HERE

My mom, who went to heaven in July 2010, was the most effective personal evangelist I have ever known. It was extremely common during my childhood to see my mother sitting at the kitchen table with her Bible open in

earnest conversation with another mom who lived on our street. Some of these were friends, some became friends, and some remained friends though they did not respond to the gospel. I never sensed my mother's friendship was a bargaining chip in evangelism. She found the biblical balance between influence and boldness. My mom led to Christ a woman named Shirley, who lived to the north of our house and now resides in heaven; in the two houses directly across the street, she reached Judy and Marg and a fourth woman (whose name escapes me) who lived behind us. What's more incredible is that even after moving three times since those days in the 1970s, she continued to influence each of these women for Christ. They remained friends until my mom died, and the three still living were all at her memorial service. But what of the woman to the south and the other neighbor women who had equal opportunity to hear my mother's bold witness but refused it?

When Harvest started, I wanted our people to experience success in personal evangelism, and I thought a lot about the women my mother reached versus those who refused the very same messenger with the very same message using the very same bold method. Hidden inside the stories of the women who responded to her compelling witness for Christ are stories that shatter their apparent similarity, revealing what God was doing to ready their hearts. In each instance where my mom was able to win and disciple a woman for Christ, there was an overarching life issue that ripened that woman's heart to the good news of Jesus. Understanding that difference is the key to effective evangelistic ministry in a Vertical Church.

SAME LESSON, DIFFERENT LOCATION AND TIME

Lest you think I built our entire evangelistic ministry on my mom's witness pattern, let me show it to you in Scripture and then how we seek to implement it in our Vertical Church. What did Jesus mean when He exhorted

every future evangelist? **“Do you not say, ‘There are yet four months, then comes the harvest’? Look, I tell you, lift up your eyes, and see that the fields are already ripe for harvest. Already the one who reaps is receiving wages and gathering fruit for eternal life.”**³⁷ Please don’t miss what Jesus is saying about the people He wants you and your church to get the good news to.

- Stop saying the harvest is months away; it’s today.
- All around us this moment are people ripe to the gospel.
- Look past the preference of who you want saved and locate those God has ripened.
- I can reap now where others have sown if I look for the ripe fruit.
- Gathering ripe fruit is reaping souls for eternal life.

In Vertical Church, we seek to adopt the most biblical language possible. In evangelism, we refer to people ready to respond to the gospel now as red apples; they are ripe to the gospel. For that reason we refer to people not yet ready as green apples. If you take that thinking out of John 4:34–38 and into Jesus’ interactions with people, it changes the way you see the Gospels and gospel work today. Jesus Christ constantly cut through the crowd filled with green apples to focus His energy on the red ones already ripe for His message. He left a crowd of green apples to talk with Zacchaeus, the lone red one. He turned to the desperate woman with the issue of blood even though surrounded by masses. He stopped for the centurion determined to see his daughter healed, He embraced the woman shamed by her sin whom the crowds despised, He talked at great length with Nicodemus, who longed for more than his formulaic religiosity. In every instance Jesus invested in the ripe red apples, those with strong readiness to abandon the life they knew for something better. Repeatedly Christ even explained His rationale: **“The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost,”**³⁸ **“Those who are well have no**

need of a physician,”³⁹ and there is **“more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.”**⁴⁰ Jesus gave time without limit to the red apples He met but would hardly give the time of day to the green apples. Without insulting those not yet ripe, Christ did refuse them. When the rich young ruler came to Jesus, he asked, **“What must I do to inherit eternal life?”**⁴¹ How many churches in our day would have that guy’s name on a card or have him serving as an usher in a matter of minutes? *“He seems so interested, so passionate, so hungry for the things of God.”* But Jesus used the law to elicit his prideful assertion that he was not sinful: **“All these things I have kept from my youth up; what do I lack?”** Christ responded to him, **“Go, sell everything you have and give it to the poor.”**⁴² Why did Jesus say this? Not because divesting his wealth would gain him eternal life, but because his refusal to do so revealed his unreadiness for a God other than the god of his possessions.

This revealing of a green apple’s unripeness was common with Christ. In the closing verses of Luke 9, Jesus had three quick encounters with green apples as He walked down a road. Two expressed a desire to follow Christ; the third He invited. In each instance Christ responded in a way that revealed the person’s unripeness: **“You’re not ready to follow me, I don’t have a place to lay my head down,”** **“Leave the dead to bury their own dead,”** **“Followers don’t look back; you’re unfit.”**⁴³ Too shallow, too superficial, too slow, in each instance Christ turned the green apple away. But when people become aware of personal sin, open to complete life change, humbled enough to see their needs, they are ripe, red, and ready for a gospel witness. Those are the ones Christ sought out.

WHAT MAKES A PERSON RIPE

I will never forget the “successful” youth pastor I once heard explaining his evangelistic strategy for students. “We go into the high school and seek to

win the captain of the football team and the head of the cheerleaders, because when you have won them, you've won everybody," he said. That's not theology; it's sociology. Jesus wouldn't try to win the popular green apples; He would send them away. If Jesus went into a high school today, He would look for the kid in the corner of the cafeteria with the pocket protector and the tape on his glasses because this kid already knows his thing is not working. Some weekends at Harvest we will baptize hundreds of formerly red apples now won for Christ, and each is given a chance to tell his or her story. When you personally baptize so many people and ask each one how he or she came to Christ, the pattern gets engraved upon your mind. Each person tells the same story with a single strand of variation. It goes like this: "I was going along, thinking I was too sexy for my shirt, and then God dropped a *boulder* on my life." That's it. That's every adult conversion story we hear in our church. Now, the label on the boulder may change, but apart from that, the stories are identical. "I thought I had it all together, I thought I didn't need God, I thought Christianity was a crutch for cripples, and then I found out I was crippled when ..." Same story, different boulder. For some it was a failed marriage, a profound loss, or a personal loneliness that wouldn't go away. For others it was a persistent addiction or an existential crisis or misery with everything they acquired when they found out it couldn't fill the longing in their souls. For many it was simply the realization that the love they longed for did not come in a horizontal human package but only from a Vertical source, and the weight of sin they carried could be lifted only by a Savior.

When you have heard thousands of these stories, you don't wonder anymore how it happens. God uses the circumstances of life to ripen people to the gospel. Apart from that circumstance, we can target people and take them to dinner and testify through words and example to the truth about Jesus, but they will remain green to the gospel. Only when God Himself moves in their hearts to ripen them through a circumstance or condition

that bankrupts their own ability to solve will they respond to the gospel.

THIS CHANGES EVERYTHING

Most of what is wrong in horizontal church flows from attempts to get green apples interested in Jesus. Green apples are very articulate about what they do and don't want in church. They don't want to hear about money, because that is one of their idols; they don't want to be told about sin, because that assaults pride; no interest in pressure to decide for Jesus, because that threatens their autonomy. Sadly, when church becomes what green apples must have or they won't come, it ceases to be what it must be for God to attend. Church needs to be offensive to green apples, or it can't be helpful to those who are ripe. Instead of targeting the people we want to reach and building church around what they will tolerate until "boulder time," we should skip the green-apple detour completely and go straight for "**the fields ripe for harvest.**" I frequently tell the people in our Vertical Church not to bring green apples. "Look, don't bring your green-apple mother-in-law to church. She doesn't need to be in church any more than she needs a hole in the head, and having her here in the front row, with her arms all crossed—giving me the stink eye—pressures me to make church into something she won't hate instead of into what people who are ripe and ready will love." Making church into a place where green apples feel comfortable is the worst thing with the best motives currently plaguing the Western world church. Yes to

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excellence; yes to losing the religious jargon and the cheesy medieval music; but no to appealing to green-apple appetites for secular music and subjects that are worlds away from the Word of God. Red apples just need connected, understandable, authentic Vertical Church, and they will be blown away.

COMPEL THE RED APPLES TO COME IN

The reason so many thousands have come to Christ in our church is because of *who* our people witness to and *who* they bring to church. How sad when a

Church needs to be offensive to green apples, or it can't be helpful to those who are ripe.

strong Christian, badly trained, takes an unbelieving couple to dinner but fails to see the person crying in the bathroom who can't catch his or her breath. *Talk to those kinds of people; they know their thing isn't working.* How sad when we pray and plead for God to save our son but can't walk across the street and talk to the couple losing their house or their marriage or their son to some demonic darkness. Would God do more to ripen the hearts of those on our hearts if we did

more to reach the already ripe ones on His heart? How blind we are to the guy in the office who is going to lose his job because his addiction or his personal pain or his pathetic performance are gonna get him a pink slip very soon. Take him to lunch and build a bridge to his gospel readiness. Can you see him ripening? How consistently we fail to recognize the people under a

rock or up a tree and go to them with the message they are finally ripe to receive. Go hang out at Alcoholics Anonymous; there you will find a room full of ripe people looking to put flesh and bones on “higher power”—*His name is Jesus*. The lady in the supermarket line you always smile at but today she’s standing in the corner covering her face and lowering her voice as she cries into her cell phone. The flight attendant who recently sensed something from me and said with desperation as I exited the plane, “I wish I had someone to pray with me.” Of course I

prayed with her right there. The red apples are facing something, feeling something, needing something, searching for something, **“yet [in such a way that they] cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.”**⁴⁴ **“Lift up your eyes, look to the fields. They are ripe.”**

In Vertical Church we want church to be a place where God’s glory comes down so the worshippers go out determined to see others discover what they have found. If they set their sights on the people they most want to reach, they will see little fruit. If they commit to God their sister or spouse or son, and instead pursue those already ripe, they will see a harvest and be in a better position to reach their green-apple family member or friend when God does that same ripening work in them.

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WHAT TO DO AS YOU WAIT

Right now I have people in my church praying for their child in a same-sex relationship to repent and come home to family and God, a husband who ran out the door on his wife and four kids headlong into his addiction, a man who got saved and longs to see his business partner step over to faith in Christ and high-integrity business practices. In each of these situations and countless others like them, the pressure to see that person saved is immense. Every day of struggle only increases pain and makes their salvation seem less likely. But remember the road to Damascus? Saul was “**breathing threats**”⁴⁵ against Christians, seeking to arrest, torture, and kill them. Then ten minutes later he was taken to the mat and pinned by Jesus Christ Himself. Not only did he not seem ripe, he seemed to be getting a lot worse. It’s not that Saul didn’t see and needed information. It’s not that he wouldn’t see and needed confrontation. He *couldn’t* see! **“The god of this age has blinded [the minds of those] who do not believe, lest the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine on them.”**⁴⁶ In the same way, the lost people you care about most might be closest to salvation when they are furthest from God. The key to recognizing those who are ripe is to see the signs that they are about to drop to one knee. Look for tears or a story of trauma or a tired plea for strength they don’t have. Until then, our job is to keep loving them, and as we often say, “If you can’t pick the fruit, don’t bruise it.” People get saved when God ripens their hearts. Having told

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bruise it.*

them of Christ at some point, we need to pray and wait, and love and pray. It’s very important while we wait on God to ripen the hearts of those we love that we don’t get between the hammer (God) and the work (loved one).

WHEN RED APPLES COME TO VERTICAL CHURCH

To feel the weight of the life-and-death eternal struggle that goes on for human souls is overwhelming. Pastors can grow accustomed to such things, but the folks we seek to deploy in evangelism have often grown weary in the work because they have seen so little fruit. Deploy your people in red-apple evangelism flowing from the furnace of their Vertical Church experience and they will find hurting people who are excited to hear the good news and come to church with them. What changes is that red apples don't need church to be stripped of all the Vertical elements that make authentic, life-giving, manifest-presence church what it is. The red apples are ready to hear a perspective that differs from the one they learned in the world that is failing them. The last thing they need, the worst thing we could give them, is exposure to what they have already discovered to be bankrupt. Give them a room full of passionate worshippers on fire for Jesus Christ with a powerful proclamation of God's Word applied to real life, and they will run to embrace what they have been searching for and longing for. **“But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or an uninformed person comes in, he is convinced by all, he is convicted by all. And thus the secrets of his heart are revealed; and so, falling down on his face, he will worship God and report that God is truly among you.”**⁴⁷

MESSAGE CONTENT FOR RED APPLES

What has blown my mind through many years now is the almost total disparity between the subject of my message and the response to the gospel. Because I give the message of Christ and salvation every week in some way, we see red apples coming to Christ no matter the topic. A few weeks ago, I gave a message called “Bigger than My Religion” in a biographical series on the life of Paul. I preached on Philippians 3:1–8. I didn't pray a sinner's prayer, and I didn't give any opportunity for people to respond publicly, but I knew the room was

filled with people who couldn't wait to pick the reddest apples. By Monday the stories were flooding in of church members who had prayed with people to receive Christ after the service, in the hallways, on the way to their cars, at a restaurant, and throughout the rest of the day. Praise God!

The gospel is not a formula. We don't have a clear plan to measure response or a mechanism we always turn to. The biblical method for publicly confessing Jesus as Lord is baptism. After "sowing" the gospel for several weeks, we will periodically have what we call a "reaping" Sunday, which fits well with the "fields are ripe" analogy. We don't announce these Sundays, but we do plan ahead for the many who have embraced Jesus as Savior and Lord in recent weeks to come and publicly identify with Christ through baptism. We give opportunity for each one to answer three simple questions: 1) How did you come to know Jesus Christ personally? 2) How has your life been changed by Jesus Christ? 3) Why do you want to be baptized? The third question allows them to clearly articulate faith in Christ's atonement for their sin. If they get nervous, we will ask, "Do you believe Jesus Christ is God's Son? Do you believe He died to pay the penalty for your sin and rose from the dead? Are you now confessing Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord?" We have been doing this for years to great celebration and impact for Christ. Follow the link at the end of this chapter to see an actual invitation to baptism and videos highlighting the conversion testimonies on such weekends. Watching these videos is essential to understanding the implications of this chapter for your church.

THE GLORY IS IN THE NURSERY

Every church needs a spiritual nursery. It's the place where baby Christians feed on the milk of the Word and begin to grow in grace and knowledge of Christ. It's where the action is. Our elder board chairman for the first twenty years of Harvest showed a lot of wisdom in choosing to serve in our

new-believers class. Nothing is more exciting than new life—just as we love to hold a newborn baby in our arms, smelling the freshness of their skin and feeling their innocent dependence on parental love; so a regular influx of new Christians alters a church. Sadly, most churches are not experiencing this. Nothing drives the dark of divisiveness from a church like a steady stream of fresh conversions to Christ at every age.

We work hard at telling the stories of people converted to Christ at our church on a daily basis. We capture the testimonies on video and tell the whole church about the glorious thing God has done. We record the baptisms and create a montage detailing how each new birth came about. I highlight conversion stories in my sermons and through the small-group ministry. When the spiritual nursery of a church is full and everyone knows it, a lot of church problems are solved. Why? Because when through a local church individual lives are changed by the gospel, everyone is forced to admit that the church's **“works have been carried out in God.”**⁴⁸ You and I can't save anyone; you and I can't break an addiction or heal a selfish broken marriage or bring a prodigal back to God and family. Individual salvation stories are the clearest fingerprint God ever puts on a local church. A church overflowing with conversion stories is immersed in the experience of God doing among us what we could never do ourselves, and that's when the gospel comes down.

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UNFRUITFUL WITH THE GOSPEL

Whatever we think of this church or that one, **“you will recognize them by their fruits”**⁴⁹ applies to more than just individuals. Why are some of the churches, most focused on “orthodoxy” of doctrine, least effective in seeing that sound doctrine penetrate human hearts and fill the spiritual nursery? The idea of a sound message that doesn’t bring a harvest of souls would have been deeply offensive to Christ and the apostles. Jesus said, **“I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit,”**⁵⁰ and, **“By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.”**⁵¹ Paul said, **“The gospel, which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and increasing.”**⁵² In a Vertical Church we understand that both more and better disciples increase glory that goes to God. Only God can penetrate a human heart with the gospel, and only God can grow that person into a life of selfless service and holiness that adorns the gospel and thereby brings God glory.

The majority of pastors are deeply determined to see people far from God reached with the gospel. For this reason, the message of chapter 1 is extremely important. Unless we believe that God has installed a hunger for Himself in the human soul, we waste massive amounts of time seeking to engage people instead of simply addressing the longing for transcendence God has already given. How much of our evangelistic effort seeks to entice people with horizontal benefit instead of tapping into the deep Vertical longing God has given them when they appear ripened to that awareness.

As a whole, the horizontal, Western-world church has been off track on evangelism. Drifting away from the *who* (those ripe to the gospel), we have lost the *how* (biblical boldness) and slipped into unbiblical methods that bear little fruit and bring no glory down. In Vertical Church we come back to both. Find the red apples ready now for a bold witness for Christ. Bring them into the center of the manifest presence of God at church, and their conversion stories will increase the experience of glory. Early in the

history of our Vertical Church there was an extended season when we saw no visible evidence that people were coming to Christ. There were several months with no baptisms, no reports of any members leading someone to Christ, no salvation stories, even among our children and young people. All that changed when we got together as a church and dropped to our knees to **“pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest,”**⁵³ and that is what the final chapter of this book is about. I know with certainty that *none* of the glory we weekly experience would happen without the pillar of prayer.

FOR REFLECTION

- How would you describe the difference between red and green apples as presented in this chapter? What experiences have you had trying with either?
- How would you describe the evangelism culture of your church? To what extent is your congregation growing by new conversions to Christ?
- When did you last share the gospel with someone personally? In retrospect, was that a green or red apple? How do you know?



Discover More Online

For video and other features related to the content of this chapter, go to verticalchurchmedia.com/chapter7.



VERTICAL PROFILE

Name: Joel Anderson

Location: Orlando, Florida

Date of church plant: December 5, 2007

Core group: 30

Current size: 900



It was July 1995. Jill and I had just moved to Chicago to attend seminary. While exploring the area, we stopped in at a local bagel spot. The college girl behind the counter noticed I was wearing a Christian T-shirt and asked where we went to church. “We just moved here and don’t have a church home.” She took our number and encouraged us to come and check out her church. Wow. What female college student “on the clock” invites strangers to church?

Answer: One who attended Harvest Bible Chapel in Rolling Meadows!

And we went. We found our way to the nosebleed section of a high school auditorium—to get a feel for what was going on. We didn’t know a single song they sang that morning but could tell that there was something unique among this group of people. They were genuine and fully engaged but not flashy or out of control. We loved the balance.

When Pastor James brought the message from God’s Word, we were struck by the directness, simplicity, and urgency of his appeal. And although Jill and I had both grown up in Bible churches, his tact of taking it all from the text was both challenging and refreshing. It hit us between the eyes in that sort of “Thank you, sir, may I have another” way. We were hooked. We loved the simplicity too: Sunday, small groups and service. It was uncluttered strength. Contemporary worship without watering down God’s Word.

Our first assignment was a new Harvest church plant in Crystal Lake, Illinois. There’s always something inherently exciting about new stuff, and

a new church is no exception. But getting a new group going often comes with old challenges. Despite the joy of seeing a group of 180 become 900, the numeric uptick brought a steep learning curve about the realities of being the body. With only a few years of history, the choices of others merited the public discipline of three key members—three separate, unrelated incidents that created challenging confidence questions. The result was at least 250 people leaving the church.

It was an incredibly humbling time of tears and sleepless nights. Through much difficult deliberation with our board and the fellowship, we agreed the best course of action was to allow Crystal Lake to become a part of the growing campus model in Chicago, while allowing me an opportunity to pastor a core group of thirty in Orlando. While the story isn't over, Crystal Lake is a healthy and vibrant church of 1,200, and Orlando has grown to 900 in four years (Psalm 115:1; 118:23).

New churches are absolutely exciting opportunities to see God at work, but the path is rarely without pain and cost. Those new lessons aren't always the ones we choose from the menu ... *but God often does*. And yet, every episode thrusts us toward the One who is able. I've taken refuge in Paul's sweet reminder in Philippians 1:29 (NASB): "For to you it has been granted for Christ's sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake." Through these seasons God has brought us to a place of deeper joy in His revealed glory than ever before.

To get a copy of the entire book "Vertical Church," click [HERE](#).

