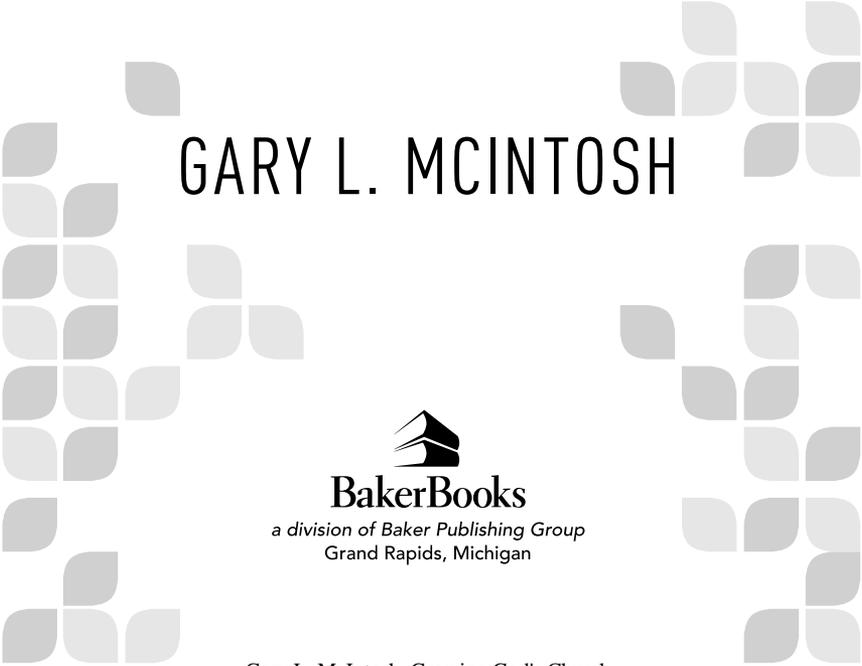


# GROWING GOD'S CHURCH

*How People Are Actually Coming to Faith Today*



GARY L. MCINTOSH



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To George G. Hunter III,  
for his over fifty years of pioneering research  
on how to effectively communicate  
the gospel of salvation to secular people.

# Contents

Acknowledgments 9

## **Part 1 The Church Today**

1. An Old Story Retold 13
2. What Is Our Mission? 27
3. What Is Our Priority? 37
4. What Is Our Role? 51
5. What Is Our Focus? 65
6. What Is Our Context? 75

## **Part 2 Faith Today**

7. Who Led You to Faith in Christ? 91
8. What Method Most Influenced Your Decision for Christ? 103
9. Why Did You Begin to Attend Church? 115

Contents

- 10. Why Do You Remain at Your Church? 129
- 11. What Is the Pastor's Role in Evangelism? 145

**Part 3 Evangelism Today**

- 12. Principles of Effective Evangelism 155
- 13. Inviting Others to Dine with Jesus 163

Appendix: Survey Instrument 177

Notes 185

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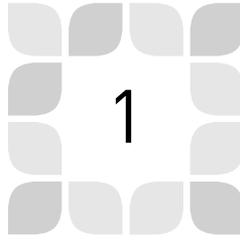


Part 1



The Church Today





## An Old Story Retold

It is an old story that has been told many times before, but like many good stories, it warrants telling once again. Sometime in about the year 30 of the Christian era, a man was sitting at his work when he encountered a person who was about to change his life forever. Matthew, who also went by the name Levi, had painstakingly worked his way up to be the primary tax collector in the area of Capernaum, located in Palestine close to the Sea of Galilee. Matthew worked for the Roman government authorities, but he had grown up in the area and knew the local people and customs well.

The people of Galilee were not wealthy, and the tax revenue that Matthew collected for Herod Antipas was a heavy burden on them. The fact that Matthew added an extra fee to the taxes to provide for his own salary left a bitter taste in the mouths of the people, and most saw him as a traitor to

his own people. Indeed, the people of Galilee refused to be friends with Matthew, and so he spent a great deal of time with other tax collectors.

Little did people know, because he never spoke of it, that Matthew felt a deep loneliness and did not like being hated by his own community. Like most people, Matthew wanted to enjoy love and respect from his neighbors and family. Deep in his heart, he longed for a life of meaning. Being a tax gatherer had made him wealthy, he lived in a beautiful home, and his family owned every material item they desired. Still, he was not happy. He longed for inner peace that the great wealth he had amassed could not provide. Most of all, he wanted to be accepted by the people.

Being an educated man, and with his tax booth located in a central place, he easily observed the impact the new teacher was having on the people of Galilee. He had met Jesus once or twice and was surprised to find that Jesus did not criticize or curse him for being a tax collector. Every time Jesus engaged him in conversation, he did so in a respectful and loving manner. Matthew was drawn to Jesus but was cautious, not wanting to open up to just any stranger who came along. The years of abuse he had suffered from the people of Galilee made him cynical about ever having friends, but quietly he hoped that someday he would be accepted and loved.

The new teacher had caught his attention, particularly due to the merciful way he dealt with the most marginalized people in the community. One day Matthew observed Jesus when a man with leprosy came and knelt before him. Most religious teachers of the day screamed out, telling lepers to get away from them because they did not want to make themselves impure. To Matthew's astonishment, though,

Jesus healed the man of his leprosy. A few days later, Matthew heard talk about how Jesus had healed a centurion's servant who lived in Capernaum simply by declaring that the servant was free of disease. He also heard it whispered that Jesus had healed the fisherman Peter's mother by simply touching her hand. What was most astonishing was when Matthew saw Jesus drive demons out of people with just his spoken word. These and other actions by Jesus were discussed all over town, and Matthew was beginning to believe that perhaps Jesus had the answers he was seeking.

Then one day as Matthew was seated at his booth collecting taxes, Jesus walked by, stopped for just a moment, looked Matthew squarely in the eyes, and said, "Follow me." It was a crazy request. How could he leave his work at a moment's notice and simply follow this itinerant preacher? Before he knew it, though, Matthew found himself standing up, walking away from his table, and moving in Jesus's direction. It was really an outrageous thing to do.

Peter had done a similar thing, but Peter could always go back to being a fisherman if it did not work out with Jesus. Matthew, on the other hand, would never be able to go back to being a tax collector. He could never return to his booth. Surely he would suffer the ridicule of the people who already detested him. However, there was something about Jesus's call on his life. Matthew knew deep inside that his life had been changed simply because he had accepted Jesus's invitation to follow.

Before long Matthew realized something had changed. He was no longer the same man. He had lost his desire for money and material possessions. New thoughts were coming into his mind, and strangely, he began to think about the tax gatherers with whom he had often partied, traveled,

and visited. He knew that many of them were struggling with acceptance, just as much as he had been until he found Jesus. What could he do to help them meet the man who had changed his life? He decided to invite Jesus and his friends to the evening meal at his home.

The evening meal was the largest and most important meal of the day. Matthew knew that many of his friends would be willing to come, if not to meet Jesus, at least to have a good meal together. But would Jesus come? Religious leaders in Galilee were loath to eat with tax gatherers and impure sinners who did not follow the regulations of the law. Eating together was an important social and religious testimony, as well as an indication of who was accepted and not accepted as friends. Nevertheless, if Jesus were to come, his willingness to dine with them would imply a willingness to accept the people that others rejected. After much thought, Matthew approached Jesus with the invitation and was excited when Jesus graciously accepted. He was truly wiser and more merciful than the scribes and Pharisees, and because of Matthew's invitation, many of his associates dined with Jesus that day.

### **A Perplexing Problem**

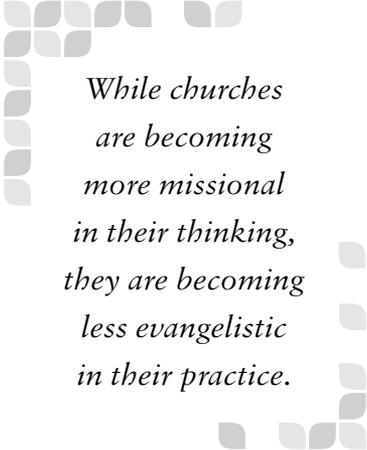
Dining with Jesus is a metaphor for engaging our family, friends, and associates with the gospel of salvation. Since the death, burial, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ, his followers have worked diligently to reach those outside of the church with the saving message of salvation. Yet over the last couple of decades, I have noticed the emergence of a perplexing problem among Christian churches. Simply stated, while churches are becoming more missional in

their thinking, they are becoming less evangelistic in their practice; that is, they are less involved in helping new people dine with Jesus.

I realize that some observers of the North American church may disagree with me, but it is my perception that direct evangelism receives little emphasis, encouragement, or training in our churches. This is quite different from what I encountered in my early years of church ministry after I first placed my personal faith in Jesus Christ. Allow me to briefly share my story as an illustration of how evangelism was emphasized in past years.

I grew up in a nominally Christian home. My mother and grandmother had committed their lives to Jesus Christ during the Great Depression of the 1930s, were baptized, and, in their own words, “attended church every time the doors of the church were open.” Unfortunately, life for both of them had taken several unexpected turns by the time I came along, and they drifted away from church, never to attend on a regular basis again.

Being good “Christian” people, they raised me to respect God and the Bible and to be a good boy, which meant no cussing. The need for me to personally decide to follow Christ, however, was never part of the conversation. Beyond a basic respect for God, my family, and the Bible, the only biblical education I received came through some early Christian television preachers and attendance at a two-week vacation Bible school one summer before I entered third



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grade, where I memorized the Ten Commandments and the Twenty-third Psalm.

My commitment to Christ came through the invitation of a friend who lived next door. Neil (his real name) was attending a small Bible church three blocks from our homes, and he regularly asked me to go to Sunday school—for three years! When he invited me to go with him, I always agreed to, but every time he came by on Sunday morning to pick me up, he found me asleep. Even today I hear echoes of my grandmother answering the door and saying, “I’m sorry, Neil, Gary’s in bed, but you keep asking him, and one of these days he’ll go with you.” Grandmothers are, of course, always right, and one day I did get up and go with Neil to church, where I placed my faith in Christ alone for salvation. I started attending church, getting involved in ministry, and growing in my faith.

Soon I discovered that the church cared deeply about lost people. The gospel of salvation was preached regularly from the pulpit. Organizations like Youth for Christ, the Navigators, and the Billy Graham Association were esteemed as models of outreach, along with several mission organizations. Almost immediately after becoming a believer in Christ, I was instructed in how to share my faith and was encouraged to do so. Along with others from the church, I attended a Sunday school convention held in Denver, where the course options included several classes on evangelism of children and adults.

At Youth for Christ I was taught to counsel other students. I joined teams distributing Christian literature at local events and caught a vision for reaching friends in high school. In college I learned the “Four Spiritual Laws,” canvassed neighborhoods, and visited other college campuses to share my faith.

Later, after graduating from seminary, I attended an evangelism conference that taught Evangelism Explosion

(EE), offering a new approach to reaching people. More than fifteen hundred people attended that conference to learn a more effective way to share the gospel. In those years EE was widely known, and I encountered numerous churches using it wherever I traveled.

On entering the pastorate, the first ministry I started was an evangelism training class. We called on visitors to share the gospel and went door-to-door in the neighborhood around the church facility sharing our faith. Following nine years of pastoring a local church, I spent several years leading friendship evangelism training conferences as part of the team at the Institute for American Church Growth. By my calculations, our team led about 225 events in a little over a decade, training some twenty-five thousand people to share their faith throughout the United States.

Until approximately 1995 every church at which I spoke, led training, or consulted gave evidence of a passion to reach people for Christ. Unfortunately, since the mid-1990s, the interest in evangelism has declined, except for a few denominations and local churches. For example, between 1983 and 1995, I conducted 115 training seminars for local churches and denominations, with nearly half (56) focused on evangelism. However, between 1995 and 2013, I have conducted 153 training conferences with only 1 focused specifically on evangelism!

My story illustrates the central place that evangelism held in church ministry just a few years ago. It is quite different today. There is less emphasis on evangelism in our churches than there used to be just two decades ago. Some will point out that the context in the United States has changed greatly over the last half century, particularly during the last twenty years; and indeed, it has changed greatly. The world in which we live and minister does not seem as open to hearing about

Jesus Christ and the gospel of salvation. The general culture has marginalized churches and Christians to the point that the classic gospel message is not respected or allowed an unbiased hearing. It is well established that we live in a post-Christian culture where it is much more difficult to speak about the Christian faith, sin, judgment, reconciliation, and the uniqueness of Jesus Christ as the only way to heaven. Christians in general are afraid to use the word *evangelism*, as it recalls memories of judgmental people, forced presentations, talking to strangers, and unwise practices of proselytizing persons against their will.

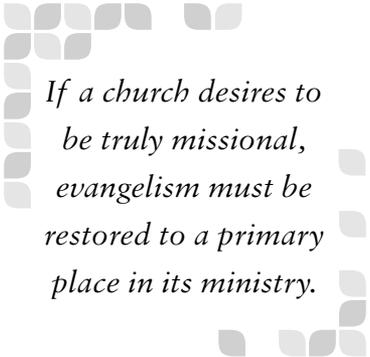
Generally Christians recoil at the thought of evangelizing their family, friends, and neighbors for fear of being labeled intolerant of other people's faith and lifestyles. It is my educated guess that at least 90 percent of churches and Christians are reluctant to proclaim the classic gospel of salvation, even on Easter Sunday. In place of evangelism, churches have adopted a concept of missional outreach, which usually means they do acts of love, mercy, and justice in their communities. Any sort of outreach that affects our communities and families for Christ is good, but it is equally important in today's postmodern society for Christians and churches to proclaim the Good News of salvation in Jesus Christ. Good works and deeds do open doors for sharing the gospel, but it is only the message of Jesus Christ's death, burial, and resurrection that has saving power.

### **Evangelistic Insights**

This is the reason I am writing this book. While it is important in today's postmodern society for Christians to let their light shine through missional acts of service, it is equally important,

perhaps more so, to proclaim the Good News of salvation in Jesus Christ. Individuals who receive a cup of cold water in the name of Jesus may think more highly of the church that dispenses the water, but they will still be eternally separated from Christ unless they believe in Jesus for salvation. Thus it is a central premise of this book that for churches and Christians to be truly missional, evangelism must be restored to a primary place in life and ministry. While there is certainly resistance to the gospel message in our current culture, the resistance to evangelism is more often in the church than in the world. Hurting people are still looking for direction and hope, which only the Good News of salvation in Jesus Christ can provide.

Closely related to this purpose—that we need to proclaim the Good News of salvation—is the reality that few leaders understand how men and women are finding faith or connecting with a church in today’s world. Most church leaders continue to rely on old statistics that, while factual three to four decades ago, are no longer valid. For example, in the 1980s it was reported that 85 to 90 percent of people were coming to Christ through family and friends. This statistic is still widely quoted, but my research reveals it is no longer factual. Family and friends now account for just 59 percent of faith conversions, which is a decline by one-third in the influence of family and friends on evangelism. Another example reveals that thirty years ago pastors were responsible for just 6 percent of faith decisions, but my new research reveals that pastors and other staff members are now responsible for 17 percent

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*If a church desires to  
be truly missional,  
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of all commitments to Christ, which is a 283 percent increase in the impact that pastors are having evangelistically. While my new research reveals some changes in the manner people are coming to faith, it also confirms some old truths. For instance, it has long been believed that most churches reach people within a twenty-mile radius of the church's campus, usually referred to as a ministry area. My study confirms this belief, as 100 percent of new believers say they travel less than twenty miles to their church. Thus *Growing God's Church* will, as English novelist William Thackeray wrote, "make new things familiar and familiar things new."

### Design of the Study

Although the topics of evangelism and assimilation have always been intertwined, serious research on how people come to faith in Christ and into his church is a recent endeavor. The well-known researcher and speaker Win Arn conducted the most influential study in North America during 1979 and 1980, and for more than three decades, his findings have continued to impact local church strategies for winning people to faith in Christ and connecting people to a church. While serving as vice president of consulting services for Arn's Institute of American Church Growth in the years 1983–86, I was active in communicating his original study to numerous churches. From my perspective, few studies over the last half century have had such major influence on church ministry as Arn's study. However, in the late 1990s, I began to notice that some of Arn's findings did not ring true in the numerous churches for which I was consulting. It occurred to me that it might be wise to rework Arn's original study to see how

people were coming to faith in Christ and his church at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

### *Phase One—Preliminary Research*

To assess my observations, I conducted a small preliminary study of eleven churches for which I had consulted and had statistical information. This exploratory study, “How People Come to Christ and the Church: A Case Study,” was presented on November 12, 1999, at the annual meeting of the American Society for Church Growth, Indianapolis, Indiana. It confirmed my suspicion that things had changed since Arn’s original study. Participants who listened to the presentation offered numerous suggestions and encouragement to move forward with a full-scale study.

### *Phase Two—Data Collection*

Since my desire was to conduct a national study that would have validity across numerous denominations throughout the United States, I asked my colleague Michael Anthony from Talbot School of Theology, Biola University, to assist in the overall research design, development of a survey instrument, collection of data, and initial data analysis. Michael has a double PhD and is a recognized expert on research and survey design. Together we developed a list of potential questions and tested a preliminary survey before settling on the final instrument (see the appendix for a copy of the final survey used in this study).

We determined to survey only people who had joined a church within the two years before completing our survey. To locate new church members, we asked randomly selected pastors to distribute the surveys for us to people who had become part of their church within the previous two years. We

began the process of distributing surveys to pastors in 2006 with the hope of compiling a minimum of 1,000 completed ones by 2008. The extra steps of having pastors distribute, collect, and return surveys from people in their churches ended up taking longer than we expected. However, by November 2008 we had collected enough surveys to do an initial data analysis, which Michael presented at the American Society for Church Growth annual meeting on November 14, 2008, in La Mirada, California. Once again, the questions and suggestions from participants provided helpful ideas for further analysis. Several pastors who were present at the meeting volunteered to help distribute additional surveys so we could reach our minimum of 1,000. By 2010 we had collected 1,093 usable surveys, entered the data, and were ready to complete our final analysis.

### *Phase Three—Analysis and Writing*

After entering all of the survey information into a database, another of my colleagues, Kevin E. Lawson, EdD, who directs Talbot's PhD and EdD programs in education, assisted in cleaning up the raw information and running the preliminary data analysis. This was completed in 2013, but final analysis and writing the results was delayed until summer 2014 due to other projects on my calendar.

Altogether the study encompassed a span of six years for data collection and another four years for analysis and writing. In the final total, 1,093 surveys were received, representing twenty-seven denominations from forty-three different states. Validity is determined to be within  $\pm 4$  points.

Respondents came from several traditions, such as Baptist (38.3 percent), nondenominational (23.6 percent), Wesleyan

(15.6 percent), Free Church (6.5 percent), Christian Church (6.2 percent), and Reformed (5.4 percent). The completed surveys represented 436 men (40.4 percent) and 641 women (59.5 percent). As for generations, 20 percent were Builders, 37 percent Baby Boomers, 40 percent GenXers, and 6 percent Millennials. Regarding location, 16.5 percent resided in rural areas, 13 percent in small towns, 33.5 percent in small cities, 24 percent in medium cities, 7 percent in large cities, and 6 percent in metropolitan cities.

### Layout of the Book

*Growing God's Church* is organized around ten crucial questions—five biblical and five practical. Chapters 2 through 6 engage some of the biblical issues surrounding evangelism, namely: What is our mission? What is our priority in mission? What is our role in mission? What is the focus of our mission? And what is the context of our mission? As you may be aware, such questions are not new, but *Growing God's Church* calls us back to the classic biblical understanding of these issues.

The second part of this book reveals the findings from the study of how people are coming to Christ and a church. Chapters 7 through 11 ask and answer the following key questions:

- Who led you to faith in Christ?
- What method most influenced your decision for Christ?
- Why did you begin to attend church?
- Why do you remain at your church?
- What is the pastor's role in evangelism?

The book closes with two chapters noting principles for effective evangelism and practical ideas you may begin to use immediately to increase your church's fruitfulness in evangelism by helping more people dine with Jesus.

If you could see more people come to faith in Christ through your church's ministry, would you be interested? If help were offered for connecting more people in your church, would you be interested? If more people in your church could understand, grasp, and enjoy evangelism, would you be interested? Then read this book. The answers are here, discovered from people who recently received Christ and connected with a church.