

The Biblical Mandate for House to House Evangelism, Exposited and Applied

I. Exposition

The book of Acts clearly teaches and models by example aggressive evangelism for every church member; all should go “every where preaching the word” (Acts 8:4), with the goal of preaching to “every creature which is under heaven” (Ephesians 1:23; Mark 16:15), that is, giving clear presentations of the gospel¹ to every single person on

¹ Many modern gospel tracts are extremely shallow and contain little information, a stark contrast to the more Biblical evangelistic methodology of earlier centuries. The most important matter in a written gospel presentation is that the message is clearly and carefully communicated. Having glossy paper or nice pictures does not hurt, but a lost person needs to hear the message itself clearly, and have it pointedly applied to his heart and mind. Thus, a good gospel tract will tend to follow the model of preaching in Acts and proclaim “YOU are a sinner, deserve hell, have a Redeemer offered you, and need to repent and believe” rather than “We are all sinners, need to believe, or we will have a problem.” It will boldly and specifically deal with the sins and spiritual strongholds of the unconverted person (cf. Acts 2:23; 4:10; Ephesians 6:17) and plainly preach both repentance (Acts 2:38; 3:19; 5:31; 11:18; 17:30; 26:20) and faith (Acts 10:43; 16:31). A good tract will not make its highest priority preventing a wicked person from being offended, but will strive to boldly and pointedly preach the truth so that the reader will be awakened, by the power of the Holy Spirit, to see his wretched and lost condition and need of the Savior. When people heard apostolic preaching, they were either “pricked in their heart” and brought to conversion (Acts 2:37-38) or “cut to the heart” and determined to kill the preachers and even gnash on them with their teeth (Acts 5:33; 7:54). An unconverted person who reads a good gospel tract will not be unmoved—either he will be convicted and awakened, and thus come to repentance or at least see his need to seek for Christ, or he will be convicted, angry, offended, and hardened. Nor should a tract be overly concerned about having “too much” content. A lost person needs to “strive to enter” into the kingdom of God (Luke 13:24), and must seek and find the narrow gate that leads to life (Matthew 7:13-14). The fact that salvation is not by works does not exclude the Biblical fact that an unconverted person must make, by God’s enabling grace, certain responses of listening and accepting the Word of God if he is going to be converted (John 5:39; Romans 10:14). If a sinner is not willing to even read a tract with a lot of verses, he is obviously not seeking or striving to enter into the kingdom. Furthermore, if he will not listen to the Word, he would not be saved even if a dead person came out of hell to warn him (Luke 16:31), for “faith *cometh* by hearing, and hearing by the word of God” (Romans 10:17). If even a dead person coming from hell to give a personal warning has no converting power in comparison to the Word, why would pictures, glossy paper, and stories, but few verses, be superior in gospel tracts or lead more to genuine conversions than careful and detailed presentations with much Scripture? Tracts do not need to be designed so that every single person who receives one will read the entire thing. The Lord Jesus Himself hid the truth from those who were not willing to listen so that their hearts would not grow even harder (Matthew 13:13). A good tract will have enough information for that minority of lost people who are seeking the truth to clearly understand what they must do to be saved, and will be pointed enough so that such seekers, and those who are careless but willing to listen to written preaching, will be awakened to their sinfulness and need of Christ.

A variety of good gospel tracts that meet Scriptural criteria and have a Biblical philosophy of evangelism are available from Bethel Baptist Church in El Sobrante, CA (www.pillarandground.org).

the face of the earth. House to house evangelism is the explicit pattern of the book of Acts.² In Acts 5:42 the apostles “daily in the temple, and in every house, [] ceased not to teach and preach Jesus Christ.”³ The preaching was persistent (5:42, “daily”) and sought

² The pattern in Scripture is going out two by two to evangelize (Mark 6:7; Luke 10:1; Acts 4:13; 13:2, 43; 16:19; 17:10; Revelation 11:3), often with one “chief speaker” (Acts 14:12). There were still converts when Paul, out of necessity (Acts 17:14-15), evangelized on his own without a partner, but not as many (Acts 17:34). Aggressive preaching to the lost everywhere is also the model of other parts of Scripture; “Go out quickly into the streets and lanes of the city . . . go out into the highways and hedges” and, by powerfully preaching the gospel, “compel [men] to come in” to the kingdom of God (Luke 14:21-23) is hardly fulfilled by churches or saints who refuse to go to “every creature” (Mark 16:15) in their area, but only witness to friends, neighbors, acquaintances, and coworkers. Nor is it acceptable to only occasionally go house to house, or have anything less than a passionate and zealous desire and commitment to very regularly (and would that not be at least weekly?) go to “cold” contacts and preach the gospel; the command is not just “go,” whenever there is nothing else to do, but “go out quickly” (v. 21), and continue to go out until the Lord’s “house is filled” (Luke 14:21, 23).

³ Of course, house to house is not the only means of giving out the gospel mentioned in Acts; in addition to evangelistic preaching outside of church meetings (Ac 2:14-40, 3:12-26, etc., a great variety of methods of giving out the gospel appear: see Ac 5:42, 8:26-40, 13:7-12, 16:13-14, 31-32, 20:20-21, etc.). Note as well that to “teach and preach Jesus Christ . . . in every house” implies more than simply seeking to win a man to Christ at his doorstep and then leaving him there, whether he responds or not. A series of home Bible studies which preach the gospel and then disciple converts, in addition to attempts to see conversion “cold” at the door, are at least implied through the inclusion of “teach” with “preach” (cf. Matthew 28:18-20). Acts 17:17 indicates that Paul took inquirers, those who were seeking for salvation and were open to the gospel, and “met . . . daily with them,” a specific basis for repeated and careful contact with the lost in the manner of evangelistic Bible studies. In Acts 19:8 Paul dealt with a lost group for three months, with the result that souls were saved (19:9). He only stopped preaching the gospel to them when those who were still unconverted were evidently hardened and openly antagonistic (19:9). Those who only speak to the lost at their doorsteps often cease to deal thoroughly enough with them, giving up on them or failing to provide them with enough detail before they are clearly hardened, with the result that fewer of them are saved than could be with a fully Biblical methodology.

Churches today that offer evangelistic Bible studies today tend to have much higher percentages of salvation decisions that lead to baptism and church membership (and so are not spurious) than churches that solely seek to lead men to Christ at their doorstep without such a foundation for more in-depth instruction. The five session evangelistic Bible study written by Thomas Ross and available for download at <http://thross7.googlepages.com> is one recommended for use; study #1 covers the nature of Scripture, #2 the nature of God, #3 God’s Law and the consequences for disobedience to it, #4 the gospel, Christ’s saving work; and #5, repentance and faith; two follow up studies are also available, #6, which covers eternal security and assurance, and #7 which deals with the church—with God’s blessing, after study #5 a seeker will be converted, after #6 he will have assurance, and after #7 will be a Baptist. The four week “Salvation Bible Basics” course by Pastor Doug Hammett of the Lehigh Valley Baptist Church in Emmaus, PA (<http://lvbaptist.org>) is also good. Pastor Kent Brandenburg of Bethel Baptist in El Sobrante, CA (<http://pillarandground.org>) has also written a series of discipleship studies, *Disciplines for Disciples of Christ*, which are good for grounding new converts. Personal discipleship Bible studies subsequent to conversion are not just a natural implication of the verses in Scripture here discussed, and clear mandate of the Great Commission, but also unquestionably simply the part of wisdom.

One common modern methodology for evangelism, that of gimmicking the lost to visit church services by giving them material things such as candy or toys, is entirely absent from Scripture; in Acts, apart from those who wanted Christ for who He was, “durst no man join himself to them [Christians in church services]” (Acts 5:13). This was in accordance with the practice of the Lord Jesus, who did not want people to come listen to Him preach because they received food or other material benefits, but

to reach every single person, “every creature” (Mark 16:15), in an area (Acts 21:28). They sought, successfully, to make sure that “all they which dwelt” in the local area would “hear the word of the Lord Jesus” (19:10), something possible only if particular efforts were made to systematically reach every household; if church members only witnessed to their friends, neighbors, coworkers, and whoever else just came along the way as they pursued other matters, having “all” in an area hear would never happen. They did not evangelize in public forums and go house to house only a few weeks a year to advertise Vacation Bible School or a special meeting, but consistently and continually.

Nor did New Testament evangelism rest satisfied if a person made some kind of decision that did not lead to evidence of repentance and a new heart; in Acts, people who made salvation decisions were baptized and continued in the faith even under persecution, so that those who were “saved” were also “added to the church” (Acts 2:41-47). The kind of preaching of repentance and faith (Mark 1:15; Acts 20:21) found in Scripture leads to converts that stick. The modern practice of leading countless people to make spurious decisions actually is doing the work of the devil in inoculating people to the true gospel. In the New Testament, numbers of stand-alone professions were not counted, but numbers added to the church roll through baptism and enduring faithfully in sound doctrine and practice (Acts 1:15; 2:4; 4:4, 32; 16:5). The Holy Spirit works in the saved to join the church by baptism and continue in holiness and true doctrine (Acts 2:47;

because they wanted to follow Him because of who He was (John 6:26, 66-69). Many bus ministries keep children and others coming to visit services because of material goods that are continually provided week after week, but the Lord Jesus refused to provide worldly benefits to keep people coming to listen to Him preach (John 6:29-33, 66). The apostles likewise did not use a “cloak of covetousness” in evangelism (1 Thessalonians 2:5); they did not trick people (“cloak”) to come to church by appealing to materialism (“covetousness”), then reverse themselves and call upon them to repent of materialism, covetousness, and all other sin to surrender to Christ (Mark 8:34-36). This is carnal weaponry (cf. 2 Corinthians 2:4)—the only Biblical weapon to bring the lost to Christ is the Word of God as empowered by the omnipotent Spirit (Ephesians 6:17).

Matthew 10:22; Mark 4:17, 20; 1 John 2:19). The apostles considered someone who made a decision but did not continue as “labour in vain” (Galatians 4:11; 1 Thessalonians 3:5), in which they followed the practice of the Lord Jesus (John 8:31-32).⁴ They were not considered genuine converts who just never followed their “Lord.” When Paul’s own converts were baptized church members who were themselves “holding forth the word of life” (Philippians 2:16) and by this means “shin[ing] as lights in the world” (Philippians 2:15),⁵ then the apostle had confidence that he could “rejoice in the day of Christ, that [he] had not run in vain, neither labored in vain” (Philippians 2:16). The Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20) is to see people born again or made disciples, baptized into the church, and taught everything in Scripture, including the necessity of winning converts themselves and working to see established churches grow and new churches planted. Only when a convert has come to the point where he is himself making disciples has the Commission been fulfilled, and this, not some sort of “decision for Christ” that does

⁴ If the Lord Jesus Himself, who knew that He was speaking to true converts (John 8:30-31), gave them assurance based on the evidence of the new birth and new nature (John 8:31—a certainty in every truly converted person, John 17:17), how much the more should His people, who do not know infallibly what has gone on within a professed convert, not tell everyone who claims conversion but manifest no change in life that they have been saved! Nor can John 8:31-32 be used to establish that some sort of higher Christian life as a disciple is in view, rather than a distinction between the saved and the lost; those who do not continue and are not “disciples indeed” do not “know the truth” and are not “free.” All believers know the truth, and no unbelievers know the truth (John 1:17; 14:6, 17; 17:17, 19; and this knowledge leads to a changed life its certain result: “Every one that is of the truth heareth [Christ’s] voice,” John 18:37; and consequently becomes a true worshipper (John 4:23-24) and “doeth truth . . . that his deeds may be made manifest, that they are wrought in God” (John 3:21). Furthermore, in the immediate context of John 8:31-32 (namely, in v. 36), and everywhere else in the New Testament, being made “free” is an event that takes place at the moment of regeneration (John 8:32, 36; Romans 6:18, 22; 8:2, 21; Galatians 5:1). While the believer is to renew his discipleship daily (Luke 9:23), the call of the Lord Jesus, “Whosoever will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me” (Mark 8:34) is a call to repentance and faith, to conversion: “For whosoever will save his life shall lose it [eternally in hell]; but whosoever shall lose his life for my sake [repent of his sin and his own life and way] and the gospel’s, the same shall save it [will go to heaven]” (Mark 8:35). Those who do not become disciples lose their own souls eternally in the lake of fire (Mark 8:36). While there can certainly be false or unsaved disciples (John 8:31; 6:66) just like there can be false believers (John 2:23-25; cf. 3:1-21), every true believer is a true disciple, and every true disciple is a true believer.

⁵ Note that *hold forth* (*epechontes*) in v. 16 a participle of means indicating how the verb *to shine* in v. 15 (*phainesthe*) takes place.

not lead to baptism and a changed and consistent Christian life, must be the goal of Biblical house to house evangelism.

Apostolic preaching “in every house” must have referred to house to house evangelism,⁶ not to holding church meetings in the houses of the already converted. The context of Acts chapter five involves the apostles preaching the gospel to “the people” (from the Hebrew *ha'am*, אָמ), that is, lost Israelites, and v. 42 is a continuation of this action; v. 42 involves the type of evangelistic preaching that had just taken place in Acts 5:30-33. In 5:20, the preaching in the “temple” was evangelism, preaching “the words of this life.” Every residence in Jerusalem obviously did not have believers in it, so preaching in “every house” supports bringing the gospel to the residences of the unconverted. The fact that this evangelistic preaching (*euangelidzo*) took place every single day (*pasan te hemeran*) and it was continuing to be so (note the imperfect tense of *epausanto*) also is more suitable to reaching the lost than it is to church meetings every

⁶ This is not to say that every reference to preaching in houses involved soulwinners getting the gospel out “door to door” in the pattern of Acts 5:42 and 20:20-21. The churches also met in houses at times. However, this is often assumed for a particular text, rather than demonstrated. For example, in Acts 2:46, when the disciples were “continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart,” the temple activity was likely church assembly (or could it be evangelism?), while the breaking bread (cf. Luke 24:30; Acts 27:35) and eating their food from house to house was “regular meals at home” (*Robertson's Word Pictures*), not the Lord's supper in house churches. The simple fact that over three thousand would have been in attendance requires that the houses here were not for church meetings, but for meals, unless there were many exceedingly large mansions owned by these early Christians for them to go “from house to house” in for worship. In addition to the problem of size, there is no self-evident reason why they would not want to simply meet for church in one house regularly, instead of skipping around. Furthermore, the word *meat* (Greek *trophes*) in Acts 2:46 is never used in Scripture of the Lord's Supper (Matthew 3:4; 6:25; 10:10; 24:45; Luke 12:23; John 4:8; Acts 2:46; 9:19; 14:17; 27:33-34, 36, 38; Hebrews 5:12, 14; James 2:15). Nor is the verb *eat* (*metalambano*) ever used of the Supper (Acts 2:46; 24:25; 27:33; 2 Tim 2:6; Hebrews 6:7; 12:10). Both words are normal meal words. The view that this verse refers to believers breaking up to eat in various houses is far superior to the notion that the Christians were travelling around having church meetings and celebrating communion in many houses. The church of Jerusalem appears to have assembled regularly in the portion of the temple precincts known as “Solomon's porch” (Acts 5:12; cf. the *Zondervan Pictorial Bible Encyclopedia*, “Solomon's Porch . . . [it] was here that Christ walked and talked (John 10:23) and that His disciples seem later regularly to have gathered.”), an area large enough to fit “all the people” (Acts 3:11). This explanation is far more reasonable than to think that, with many multiplied thousands of members, the entire church somehow tried to travel “house to house” to meet in the homes of members that could not possibly fit anywhere close to the entire congregation.

single day of the year for a long period of time. Furthermore, the same sort of preaching and teaching took place in the temple and in the houses; since the temple preaching, contextually, was almost surely evangelistic to reach the lost, the house to house proclamation would have been the same. Finally, “preach” in v. 42 is not *kerusso*, but *euangelidzo*, which indicates that specific evangelizing or preaching of the gospel, rather than the simple proclamation of Biblical truths, is in view in this text; they were evangelizing in the temple and in every house.

Acts 20:20-21 also refers to house to house evangelistic preaching of repentance toward God and faith toward Christ to unconverted Jew and Gentile. “Publicly” refers to preaching in the temple, synagogues, and wherever else a crowd can be gathered; it is mass evangelism of large groups at one time, similar to modern street preaching and tract distribution in public areas. The same word in Acts 18:28 refers to “showing by the scriptures that Jesus was the Christ . . . in the synagogue” (v. 28, 26). “House to house” refers to systematically reaching every residence in an area with the gospel. The Greek structure⁷ in the verse is never used for church meetings in Scripture. Verse twenty-one refers to “testifying”⁸ to Jews and Greeks “the gospel of the grace of God” (v. 24). The overwhelmingly majority usage of the Greek word “testify” in Luke-Acts speaks of evangelism (Luke 16:28; Acts 2:40; 8:25; 10:42; 18:5; 20:24; 23:11; 28:23), and Luke never uses the word to refer to preaching in church assemblies. Acts 20:20-21 indicate that Paul taught the elders at Ephesus to practice house to house soulwinning. To attempt

⁷ However, the same Greek phrase, *kata + oikos*, occurs here in 20:20 as in 5:42, indicating their common theme of house to house evangelism.

⁸ (*Diamarturomenon*, from *diamarturomai*, a verb primarily used for evangelistic preaching to the lost in Luke-Acts. Note the connection of *diamarturomai* with evangelism in v. 24: Paul was constantly to “testify (*diamarturomai*) the gospel (*euangelion*) of the grace of God,” διαμαρτύρασθαι τὸ εὐαγγέλιον τῆς χάριτος τοῦ Θεοῦ.

to interpret the text otherwise would require it to refer simply to the teaching of Jew and Gentile elder within the Ephesian church the necessity of daily repentance and every-increasing faith in Christ. It would also make this sort of testifying about repentance and faith in the Christian life the essence of Paul's ministry (v. 24). It would ignore the fact that the "Jew . . . Greek" distinction is contrasted with the church (1 Corinthians 10:32). It would make Paul's action in the verse be the preaching of repentance and faith, not to lost people who came to church meetings, nor to normal church members, even, but specifically to the leadership, which, one would trust, would have a very high percentage of genuine converts⁹ and would need evangelistic preaching the least, and which is contrary to the emphasis in his letters to pastoral leadership (1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus). Paul was "pure from the blood of *all men*" (Acts 20:26) because he sought to reach all of them, not just the tiny minority that would want to visit Christian church services. He carefully and clearly presented to the lost the counsel of God concerning their souls,¹⁰ house to house, and he taught others to do the same. Going house to house is God's will (v. 27).

⁹ Of course, not all pastors are truly saved, even as Judas was not, but is it not straining all credulity to affirm that Paul was not taking the Ephesian elders with him house to house and teaching them to preach the gospel in this manner to the lost, so that they could teach their people likewise, but that he was, both "publically" and "from house to house," evangelizing the elders?

¹⁰ The notion that apologetics and the work involved in learning how to deal particularly with the varieties of unbelief, false doctrines, and religions one runs into because all we need to do is give out a one-size-fits-all sort of presentation of the gospel is not Biblical. Biblical soulwinners sought to "persuade" those they evangelized to be Christians (Acts 18:4; 19:8, 26:28; 28:23), "reasoned" with the lost (Acts 17:2; 18:4, 19; 24:25), and "mightily convinced" (Acts 18:28) them of their errors. Cf. 1 Peter 3:15. The "word of God" which is the "sword of the Spirit" (Ephesians 6:17) must be wielded in a way appropriate to the sort of lost person the Christian speaks to; the specific verses that deal with that individual's spiritual barriers to receiving Christ must be broken down (cf. 2 Corinthians 10:5). A study of the soulwinning methods of the Lord Jesus and the apostles in the gospels and Acts also clearly demonstrates this truth (cf. Matthew 19:16-21; John 3:1-21; 4:4-29; Acts 2:14-41; 3:12-26; 7:1-60; 17:16-31; 22:1-21—note there Scriptural use of testimony of one's personal conversion in the evangelism of others; etc.)

Commentaries support the concept of house to house visitation in Acts 5:42 and 20:20, rather than church meetings in houses:¹¹

“Every day, with great constancy and assiduity, both publicly and privately; in the temple, the place of public worship, where the Jews resorted on that account; and in each of their private houses . . . they ceased not to teach and preach Jesus Christ.” (*An Exposition of the Old and New Testament*, by John Gill, Acts 5:42)

“The apostles taught and preached not only publicly in the temple, but ‘from house to house.’ In this they give an example to the ministry of all ages, which is well worthy of imitation. Private instruction and admonition bring the teacher and the taught into closer contact, and secure an individuality of effect not attainable in a public assembly. It can not, therefore, be well dispensed with; but he who employs it most diligently will, other things being equal, employ his energies most successfully.” (*Commentaries and Topical Studies* by J. W. McGarvey, Acts 5:42)

¹¹ Commentators from Protestant denominations may believe that ministers can celebrate the “sacraments” private with only a few members of their “churches” present, but Baptists recognize that, as the church is the assembly, “private” meetings where baptism and the Lord’s supper are distributed to only a select few who are invited, are unbiblical, and corporate worship is something meet for the whole church. “House to house” does not, then, refer to “cell groups” or meetings of the *ekklesia*, the church, the assembly, where the members do not actually assemble.

Furthermore, Protestants that believe that only ministers were given the Great Commission and are responsible to preach the gospel may affirm that these text indicate that ministers should go house to house, and may try to explain the plainly evangelistic nature of the texts in question and the command to go to “every” house as a command to bring to salvation those, often essentially an entire community, baptized in infancy and thus part of their “church,” who are, despite this, plainly unconverted; Baptists, who maintain a regenerate church membership distinct from the community and the priesthood of every believer, and who properly recognize the Commission was given to the church and is the responsibility of her members as a whole, will learn from these texts that all church members should go “house to house” to “every house.” Acts 8:1, 4 indicate that all church members—not just the apostles or other leaders—were going out “every where” preaching the word (*euangelidzo*, evangelizing). Every member of the Lord’s church, unless paralyzed, etc., is responsible to go house to house. Speaking to friends, coworkers, and neighbors simply is not the teaching of Acts 8:4; 5:42; 20:20.

Of course, the fact that these passages teach that church members are to go house to house evangelizing the lost does not mean that they should not as well go to the homes of their fellow believers to strengthen them when they have needs, for discipleship Bible studies, etc.

“Though Paul preached in public, and though his time was much occupied in manual labour for his own support, Ac 20:34, yet he did not esteem his public preaching to be all that was required of him; nor his daily occupation to be an excuse for not visiting from house to house. We may observe here . . . that Paul’s example is a warrant and an implied injunction for family visitation by a pastor. If proper in Ephesus, It is proper still. If practicable in that city, it is in other cities. If it was useful there, it will be elsewhere. If it furnished to him consolation in the retrospect when he came to look over his ministry, and if it was one of the things which enabled him to say, ‘I am pure from the blood of all men,’ it will be so in other cases. . . . His aim was to show the way of salvation, and to teach in private what he taught in public. . . . while public preaching is the main, the prime, the leading business of a minister, and while his first efforts should be directed to preparation for that, he may and should find time to enforce his public instructions by going from house to house; and often he will find that his most immediate and apparent success will result from such family instructions.” (*Barnes’ Notes, Acts 20:20*)

“It is worth noting that this greatest of preachers preached from house to house.” (*Robertson’s Word Pictures, Acts 20:20*)

“Did an *apostle*, whose functions were of so wide a range, not feel satisfied without *private* as well as public ministrations? How then must *pastors* feel?” (*Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown, Acts 20:20*)

“*From house to house*. Else he had not been pure from their blood. For even an apostle could not discharge his duty by public preaching only. How much less can an ordinary pastor!” (*Notes on the Old and New Testaments, John Wesley, Acts 20:20*).

The specific illustrations in the book of Acts, given for the saints' examples and admonition, in addition to the general exhortations found throughout the Bible, including the Old Testament (Proverbs 11:30, Daniel 12:3, etc.), to give the gospel to every creature, and the logical necessity, for those with a Christ-like love for the unconverted (John 3:16; cf. Romans 9:1-3), for aggressive evangelism because of the fact that all without Christ are headed to eternal torment, renders inexcusable the churches and all Christians not bedridden and crippled that do not go house to house in nations such as the United States, where the chances of imprisonment or martyrdom for such a labor of love are essentially non-existent—first century Rome heavily persecuted believers, yet house to house evangelism was still practiced by all members. Saints who do not aggressively evangelize grievously sin against God, hinder the sort of revival found in Acts, and apparently do not esteem the blood of Christ highly enough to simply inform others, in line with the Savior's command, of the great salvation their professed Lord had to leave heaven and suffer infinitely to make possible.

II. Application

“And he said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature” (Mark 16:15).

This record of the final command of the Lord to His church is not an option. While it is certainly a church command, doubtless the imperative of reaching every creature falls upon all those who are members of His assembly. The imperative is repeated in the other gospels: “Go ye . . . teach” (Matthew 28), “repentance and remission of sins should be preached” (Luke 24). The version of the Commission in John is notable: “Whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; *and* whose soever

sins ye retain, they are retained” (John 20:23). When the saints faithfully preach the gospel, men believe, and their sins are remitted them. In this sense, believers do remit the sins of the lost. Compare Jude 22-23: “of some have compassion, making a difference [distinction]: And others save with fear, pulling *them* out of the fire.” The believer is the subject of the verb “save.” We save people in a certain sense, when we preach the gospel to them; and when we fail to fulfill our duty to do so, we retain their sins. What a responsibility Christ gives His church in John 20:23: “whose soever sins ye retain, they are retained”! They are damned because of us. We are accountable for the fact that they will suffer unspeakable, everlasting torment in unquenchable fire forever and ever. Some, “shall be tormented with fire and brimstone . . . And the smoke of their torment ascendeth up for ever and ever: and they have no rest day nor night” (Revelation 14:10-11), because of us. They weep, and wail, and suffer there, because we would not remit their sins. We were afraid to speak out boldly to them. We had our reasons to not go door to door. We had something else to do, so we did not go out soulwinning—and they will writhe, and cry, and drown in the lake of fire forever because of this something else that we made a higher priority. Paul states this truth as well. Because the apostle had “taught you publickly [mass evangelism], and from house to house [canvassing every person in the area], Testifying both to the Jews, and also to the Greeks, repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ,” because he had been faithful to “testify the gospel of the grace of God,” he was “pure from the blood of all *men*.” (Acts 20:20-26). He was not responsible for the blood of their eternal damnation. How much better to kill a man physically, yea, to expose him to the worst of earthly torments, than to be responsible for drowning him in everlasting perdition. The physical murder will last only a few moments—his spiritual murder will last forever. Had Paul not been faithful in going house to house, and doing mass evangelism “publickly,” the blood of the lost would be on his hands. Allusion is made to Ezekiel 3:18; 33:8: “When I say unto the wicked, Thou shalt surely die; and thou givest him not warning, nor speakest to warn the wicked from his wicked way, to save his life; the same wicked *man* shall die in his iniquity; but his blood will I require at thine hand. . . . When I say unto the wicked, O wicked *man*, thou shalt surely die; if thou dost not speak to warn the wicked from his way, that wicked *man* shall die in his iniquity; but his blood will I require at thine hand.”

If I do not evangelize as God has instituted—publically, and house to house—the blood of the lost will be required at my hand! Will countless souls rise up before me at judgment, and say, as they each pass groaning away before my eyes, “You retained my sins—I am here because of you—I am going to burn forever because you skipped out on door to door that week—I am here because you left early, and did not put in the hours regularly into evangelism that you ought to have—I am here because you did not carry tracts that one time—I am here because you were not filled with the Spirit, and so did not speak as you ought to have, nor been as urgent with me as you should have, when you spoke to me—I am here because you did not know how to deal with my spiritual problem, and did not use the verses you should have—I am here because you used shallow, non-convicting tracts—I am here because you, and your church, did not follow Biblical methodology—how many lost will point at me, and with voices filled with both despair—for it is now too late for them—and just anger, give me the undeniable accusation, “I AM DAMNED, AND MY BLOOD IS ON YOUR HANDS, BECAUSE YOU, YOU FAILED TO OBEY CHRIST’S COMMAND TO REACH ME!” We rightly view the mass-murderer, the serial killer, as one of the vilest of men—what multitudes, oh my soul, have I killed, what multitudes of sins have I retained, what legions of “true worshippers” (John 4:23) have I prevented from coming to know God, and offering Him glory forever, and so what infinite quantities of glory have I robbed from Jehovah?

It is no excuse if others around me are committing the same sin likewise. It is no excuse that many who go house to house also slaughter souls by their failure to properly interpret Scripture, by practicing easy-prayerism and generating false professions, or the like. Do few faithfully fulfill their evangelistic duty in my church? Their disobedience does not justify mine. Indeed, it makes it all the more necessary that I be on my guard to not wretchedly commit soul-manslaughter. It is necessary that I stand in the gap and set the right example, and thus seek to keep my brethren in Christ from having blood on their hands, rather than giving in to general apathy and allowing that to lull me to sleep.

We are very busy. We can convince ourselves—and the flesh will delight in it—that we are really fulfilling our duty when we pass out tracts to people we come across. However, “every creature” is the command, and that requires a systematic method of

seeking to reach every single person in our area, which is not possible without going house to house (as well as using the tracts, which is the “publicly” portion of Acts 20). We may even be discouraged from going because of the necessity to perform lesser, though important, goods, from doing chores, doing physical labor for the church, doing non-evangelistic but spiritual work in the church, and so on. We absolutely must not allow these things to prevent us from getting out and reaching “every creature.” The cost is far too high—the awful guilt of having on our hands the blood of lost souls!

Furthermore, not having an organized soulwinning program in a church, with specific listed days and times to go out and preach the gospel, is a very bad idea. It makes many more people guilty of this terrible sin of soul manslaughter. This brings the judgment of God upon the congregation and the individuals guilty of this, instead of His blessing. Since Scripture declares that “The fruit of the righteous *is* a tree of life; and he that winneth souls *is* wise,” and “they that be wise shall shine as the brightness of the firmament; and they that turn many to righteousness as the stars for ever and ever” (Proverbs 11:30; Daniel 12:3), it also deprives people of immeasurable eternal reward. One learns how to deal with people’s souls by doing it, so not doing it also prevents parents from knowing how to effectively deal with their own children, making them more likely to bring their offspring to false conversion, and having them lost to the world. It also prevents saved young people—and adults—from developing the spiritual toughness, tenacity, and boldness that comes from having to take a stand for Christ at doors and speak to people there. It is easier to take a stand against the world in other areas when one is regularly taking a stand against it by preaching the gospel to it. Churches that do not go soulwinning should, therefore, expect to lose more, likely many more, young people to the world and to neo-evangelicalism. People are also deprived of ability to do ministry; fulfilling the Great Commission really is the definition of what ministry is (cf. Philippians 2:22; 4:3). Church unity is weakened by not having soulwinning; the saints are bound closer together when they participate in evangelism together, communally face the opposition of the world, and experience their Savior’s consolation in their obedience. It makes it easier for someone who does not want to follow God to feel comfortable in church every week, which is a bad thing. It brings the loss of the power of the Spirit, for He empowers for the purpose of producing boldness in evangelism (Acts 1:8). Revival

should not be expected. Fewer prayers are answered. How can men lift up “holy hands, without wrath and doubting” (1 Timothy 2:8) when those uplifted hands are dripping with the blood of damned souls (Ezekiel 33:8; Acts 20:26)? It reproduces a bad model for ministry, as young people who are future preachers and leaders do not learn how to properly win souls, and so will fail to lead churches they will pastor or otherwise lead in the future to obey God in this area, so disobedience and all the ruin it causes will multiply over time. Conviction in soulwinning does not develop in a vacuum—the flesh very easily slips away from obedience in this matter, and pastors very rarely have pressure from the congregation to go door to door—the pressure is almost always to drop or decrease or minimize it, so if passion for reaching every household in a community is not deeply ingrained in young people, they will not do it later. A wrong view of church growth methodology also results—when we do not follow Scripture by reaching “every creature” in the world by going “publicly and house to house,” we adopt a system where inviting visitors becomes the main focus, and church services are changed from being for the purpose of edifying the saints who will then themselves go out into the world to do ministry—the Biblical pattern, Eph 4:11-12 (the pastor/teacher is given to perfect the saints, and the saints do ministry), to a model where church services are designed to evangelize the lost instead of edifying the saved. (Of course, it is not bad for the lost to come to church, nor to evangelize the lost that do come, but that is not the focus in Scripture for the assembly of the saints.) This inviting-the-lost-in model, versus the go-out-and-preach model of the Bible, is the root of the “seeker sensitive” megachurch, Rick Warren, neo-evangelical model that has destroyed many fundamental churches. Indeed, the distinguishing marks of the two churches in Revelation 2-3 that were not going bad were evangelism and the receipt of persecution (Revelation 2:8-11; 3:7-13)—and the latter tends to come with the former, 2 Timothy 3:12; cf. Acts 7:59; 28:20. In short, when we don’t have organized, aggressive soulwinning going out to reach “every creature,” where we don’t strongly preach that everyone should be going door to door, as well as speaking to neighbors, friends, etc. (and we will be much less effective with the neighbors and friends without the experience from speaking to others), God is not properly glorified, saints lose out on eternal reward, saints do not grow on earth as they should, and the lost are not saved as they could be—it is an unutterable tragedy.

What can we do? First, we must constantly make sure that we as individuals do not become apathetic, and that we put the time into reaching the lost that is requisite to be fully obedient to God. We should not let a week go by without getting out there and putting serious time into that final, great command Christ gave us before He ascended to heaven. Second, we should try to bring as many people along with us, and strive to convey to them a passion for evangelism, as we can. If we are in a leadership position, we can, indeed, we must, make sure that organized efforts for weekly house to house evangelism are going on, must preach strongly the necessity of participating in soulwinning, and must set the example of passionate obedience in this area ourselves. We must make sure we have the love of Christ for the lost in us, the love that led Him to even suffer the horrors of infinite wrath (Matthew 27:46) to save them, and that will move us to do our part to reach them, and convey it to others. If we have “great heaviness and continual sorrow in [our] heart” over the unconverted so that we “could wish that [we] were accursed from Christ” to save them (Romans 9:2-3), we will go out and preach to them. Third, we should fervently pray for, be deeply concerned about, troubled in spirit concerning, and passionately desire a return to and an increase of obedience to the Great Commission in our church and in the kingdom of Christ on earth at large.