

# God's New Math: *An Equation for Prayer Evangelism*

*By Brett Rickey*

My friend Jerry uses a particular term to explain the phenomena of God's blessing over his finances when he tithes the first fruits of his income each week. He says that he doesn't always know how his money is going to stretch to pay all the bills after he has given, but somehow God always works it out. He calls it "God's math." The fact that the numbers don't always add up on paper doesn't seem to bother him, and it certainly doesn't bother God for that matter.

I have seen God's math work in many areas of our church life. As a NewStart pastor, we have never had enough money to do what we wanted, but we believed in the old saying that "If it's God's will, then it's His bill." So we trust in God's math for our church's finances, as well as our personal needs.

A few years ago, we were again confronted with God's math in a new way. This time he used algebra. Simply put, God gave us an easy formula to use at Tulsa Family Church that has revolutionized the way we do outreach. We found that winning lost souls for Christ was truly as effortless as this straightforward formula. Are you ready for this? Here it is:

$$2p + 2i = \text{More People Who Know Jesus}$$

Or as we say it in our advertising, **The Greatest Gift = 2p + 2i**. Get it? Well, probably not, so let me break it down. Here's how we deliver the greatest gift to people far from God. (Salvation being the greatest gift.) Jesus once defined the greatest act of love anybody could give as, "Greater love has no one than this, that He lay down His life for His friends." When Jesus said these words, He was on his way to the cross. He knew that real love always involves sacrifice, especially when the lives of others are on the line.

I was allowed to witness this greater kind of love in action in 1995. At that time, I was working in the insurance industry in Oklahoma City. As you remember, that was the year of the infamous truck bombing of Murrah Federal Building by Timothy McVeigh on April 19, 1995. On that particular day, I was five miles away and saw the plume of black smoke rising from downtown, but had no idea what had happened. Minutes after the blast, a co-worker informed us that a bomb exploded and damaged buildings. Something inside me had me in my car headed toward the destruction.

I was able to park and run toward the damage, hoping in some way to help. Cars were still on fire, and by this time the police had formed a perimeter that we couldn't breach. I watched the firemen and authorities scramble to dig at the debris to find anyone who needed out. Those brave men and women risked their lives to pull people from the rubble. Nobody took a poll on whether it was the smart thing to do; they just acted out of love for their fellow man.

Unfortunately after weeks of digging, only a few survivors were ever found. People had volunteered from all over the country to help in the efforts, but to no avail. Hundreds lined up for city blocks to donate blood for potential survivors. It was a tremendous tragedy followed by a tremendous outpouring of love. No cost was too high to get those people out of the rubble and back to good health.

What motivated those people was simple. There were people trapped under the rubble. And to do nothing about it was totally unacceptable. That vision is a group of people dedicated to bringing people out of darkness into the light of safety. It's a picture of what our churches should be about, but many times, we miss it. Instead of rescue centers for those trapped in darkness, we have become resuscitation centers for those asleep in the light. It's dangerous a pastor people who enjoy sleeping in the light. So we decided to do something to combat the tendency of becoming ingrown, which every church battles. We decided to be more outwardly focused, but we decided the battle would be won, first, on our knees.

## ***The Evangelism Equation Variables***

At our church, we went on a year-long quest to pull people who were far from God out from the darkness of sin and the rubble of broken lives. So let's get back to algebra. Remember, the formula goes like this. The greatest gift =  $2p + 2i$ .

## ***Pray for Those Who Are Spiritually Lost***

Prayer is the most important tool in any evangelistic effort. We pray for lost people to accept Christ and begin to follow him. But no prayer = no effectiveness for Christ. The Bible assures us that, "The prayer of the righteous man is powerful and effective." But many times, prayer is an afterthought instead of a focus. Churches get locked into cool methodology and producing slick shows for entertainment, but where little life-change seems to happen. Prayer must be the centerpiece of the greatest gift campaign.

At the outset, let me give you the nuts and bolts of how we administered this campaign. In October 2003, I formed a committee called the Greatest Gift Team. These were people who share an unusually high passion for evangelism, and I knew if I could get them all together talking about evangelism, good things would result. We announced the campaign in December, and launched it in the New Year.

On the January launch day, we asked people to submit a list of three "lost" names of friends and families on a card called an Impact List. Our Greatest Gift Team took those names, put them in a database, and printed out a card to give back to the person who submitted the names. The cards were laminated and attached to a magnet for their fridge as a prayer reminder. The team committed to praying for these people, and once a quarter, our team followed up with each person to see how the list was coming. I will get to some of the results later on. So now, back to how we pray. When we pray, we do it specifically in three ways.

**First**, we pray for them to find Jesus. Since Jesus coached his followers to ask, we ask. We believe that God can help others when we pray for them. I know this sounds elementary, but there are some who think it's not biblical to pray for lost people; we do it anyway.

**Secondly**, we pray for others to help them in this journey to faith. Jesus once said, "Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field." We know that God has agents everywhere, and that he needs to be able to utilize their gifts to help your friends. Your prayers actually help God accomplish His will on the earth and more workers get sent when you ask. Jesus knew that this prayer would work. That's why he taught it to us.

**Third**, we believe that God will answer. This is the faith element in our prayer, and it is usually the most difficult. We know that God hears every prayer lifted up and that our faith is a factor in whether or not we get an answer, but sometimes we don't see quick results and the devil makes us feel like our prayers aren't heard. Don't believe that lie! Believe Jesus when He said "For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened." Keep knocking if you don't get an answer, and knock like you know somebody is home who will eventually answer the door.

So remember, the first P = Prayer. Added to prayer is the second P which is:

## ***Prepare Your Life Message***

Prayer is not the only thing for lost people to find Jesus; they need to hear real-life stories about the difference that He makes. Most of the Christians I knew growing up had been Christians since birth, it seemed. So a lot of them didn't have the real bad-boy-turns-good stories that make an exciting testimony. This made them feel a little less excited about telling the story of how Jesus had made a difference.

But one thing I know is that everyone has a story to tell of how God's grace changed them. But not everybody is prepared to tell it. And that's the sad truth in many of our churches. People just aren't ready to share what God has done for them because they haven't stopped long enough to count their blessings and write them down.

So we decided it would be good if people could prepare what salesmen call an "elevator speech." This is being able to condense your life message into a 30-second sound-byte that you could say without thinking. John encourages by reminding us that we all have a story. He wrote "Those who believe in the son of God have the testimony of God in them."

For the campaign to succeed, Christians must be able to articulate their story. It doesn't have to be a theological discourse, just the difference that Jesus has made. And when God's people start talking about their great God, the word gets out. Paul wrote of the Thessalonian church that, "The word has gotten around. Your lives are echoing the Master's Word." When you get the word out in your town, people will start talking.

Peter tells us, "Be ready at all times to answer anyone who asks you to explain the hope you have in you, but do it with gentleness and respect." Notice you don't have to be a genius who answers

everyone's arguments. Just be gentle and tell anyone who will listen about the hope you have in Christ. You can do this at Starbucks, the gas station, or Super Cuts. Just be ready and available to let God do the rest.

The first two variables in this formula are so simple and so powerful: Pray and Prepare. But as the TV infomercials say, "But wait, there is more."

## ***Invest in Their Lives***

Of all the variables, this one always proves to be the most difficult. It's difficult because it requires something that none of us can spare: an Investment of time. Most people in the U.S. are busier than ever doing more and more things. People work more hours. Add to that the average person spends hours each week just commuting, and you can see the rub. Even church calendars add problems to the lives of busy people by over-scheduling so many activities. For lifelong Christians, the game can become one where we show up when the doors are open out of habit, or because guilt and shame if we miss something.

So instead of investing our limited time with lost people like Jesus did, we can get wrapped up in our own little church world while the outside world quickly approaches an eternity without God. And when church activities become more important than investing in the life of someone far from God, churches begin to shrink and die. In the Great Commission, Jesus said to make disciples of all nations.

Can I tell you a little secret? Making disciples takes personal time. It's a lifelong process. And really, this element has been terribly under-reported in today's church. Making disciples goes beyond having someone repeat the Sinner's Prayer.

Here's something you may not know. Did you know that Jesus never had anybody repeat any Sinner's Prayer? Nope, never. Not once. Here's what He did. In Matthew 4, He said two words, "*Follow me.*" In another case, when He encountered a man possessed by a legion of demons, Jesus set him free and then sent him home to tell others. In another case, Jesus told a woman caught in adultery to "Go and sin no more." That was how Jesus gave an altar call. Three different calls; the same Jesus did the work. But that call to follow or tell others sounds harder than just repeating a prayer.

As for the fishermen, I don't believe that those guys were converted when they dropped their nets. I really don't. I think they began to learn and watch and listen. And as they did, God changed their hearts a little at a time. Then one day, when Jesus asked the question about who he was, Peter could answer, "You are the Messiah." He finally got it. My point is that making disciples is a process that is time-consuming and tailored to each individual.

I am sure that most people who follow Christ are first invited into fellowship by someone they really trust or love. These Christian people invest time in their lives and they become richer. And as a result of this investment, the lost person, living in darkness, begins to see a new light in the follower of Christ. And many times, a gradual dawning will take place. The decision to follow Christ is done step by step, instead of jumping off a cliff in a leap of faith.

When a Christian invites an unbeliever into their life, the results can be extraordinary. Peter said that we are a living witness whether we choose to be or not. “Be careful how you live among your unbelieving neighbors. Even if they accuse you of doing wrong, they will see your honorable behavior, and they will believe and give honor to God when he comes to judge the world.” This Scripture assumes that you are in some way close to your neighbors. In the isolated garage door opener-Internet-cable TV-cell phone culture we live in, it can be difficult to connect with anyone face to face. Sadly, I have met many Christian people who no longer have any influence in the lives of any unbelievers. This is sad, but there is a remedy. You must invest your life into the life of another person in order to make a disciple of Christ.

In a similar way, Jesus said “Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.” Unless they see something good, they don’t praise God. And they won’t see something from you if they don’t know you on a personal level. The fourth element involves bringing them into your family of faith.

## ***Invite Them to Church***

When the hard-living woman met Jesus at the well, she knew she really liked him. In fact, intuitively, she knew He had what all of her friends needed. So she told the whole town about it. She said “Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did.”

After we have Prayed, Prepared our story and Invested love into the life of an unbeliever, it follows that we will have earned the right to Invite them to see the Jesus we see in the body of Christ. Many lost people rail against the church because it is full of hypocrites. Sadly, sometimes it is true. But hypocrisy is not limited to the church. It is present in workplaces and bars, too. And so, after lost people see the real light in you, they are more likely to open their heart’s door to Christ.

And if our church is a church that believes in prayer, then when lost people come in among us, the resulting life change is certain through the power of the Holy Spirit. We must never forget that Jesus loves lost people far more than we do. He is wooing them all the time. He is calling them to receive His life, His truth, and His way. When people far from God get into his presence in worship, *they feel* something that goes beyond rational explanation. And that’s why we want to get them to our churches. Because if they get a little taste, we know that they will want more. The Psalmist wrote, “O taste and see that the LORD is good; how blessed is the man who takes refuge in Him!”

I know in this cynical age, we tend to forget the power of corporate worship on the heart of an unbeliever. We think everything has to be done perfectly for the message to get out. All of us can see obvious holes in the way things are done at our home church. That makes us hesitate when we want to invite someone new. But we don’t have to put on a perfect show in order for God to use us. God uses yielded hearts to change the hearts of others. Excellence is important, but it isn’t as powerful as God’s Spirit at work. And God can use churches of any size to make this campaign happen. You may not even have a pastor in your church right now, but you can pull this off. All it requires is a willing heart of passion for lost people and ready hands to do whatever God asks.

### **Prayer + Preparation + Investing + Inviting = The Greatest Gift**

So what happened at Tulsa Family Church as a result? Well, let me give you an excerpt of my report to our district in 2004. It was an exciting time for our congregation:

*Statistically speaking, this has been our biggest growth year yet. Weekend worship attendance was up 50 percent and giving was up as well. God was able to grow our church while still meeting in a school on the weekends. Our growth was fueled first by prayer. In October, we began talking about the Greatest Gift campaign for 2004. We asked everyone to identify three unsaved people in their life, to submit their names for prayer, and to do four things over the course of the year: pray, prepare, invest, and invite. We also assembled a team to pray for these people and we followed up quarterly with everyone for an update.*

*As we began the campaign in January, we saw (an) immediate numerical impact that has continued over the course of the year forcing us to add a second worship experience on Sunday mornings. Average attendance since adding this second time in April and May has been at 642 (up 68 percent over the same months last year). The results are showing what God is doing because of specific prayer.*

*One story illustrates this best. Teresa Meadows is a new, growing Christian. She is relatively shy by nature, but loves Jesus and believes in prayer. In June 2004, she told me that of the three of people that she had been praying for because of the Greatest Gift campaign, two on her list had given their heart to Jesus. We have already baptized them. The third person is her sister, who is not a Christian yet. But her three children have come to church and prayed to receive Christ. The total on her list was three, but so far, the number that she has impacted eternally has been five.*

*All this happened because of the concerted effort to pray for the lost, a willingness to get her story out, and a commitment to invest in their lives and then to invite them to church.*

My hope and prayer for your congregation is that you will put this into motion in some form. Last year, my friend Pastor Larry Morris from Broken Arrow Nazarene led this effort in his church. They improved on the idea by adding an additional component. Each week, they would light a candle for someone on the list who had given their hearts to Christ. At the end of the year, 123 candles were lit. Prayer evangelism works. And the monetary cost is negligible.

Your church will change if you embark on this journey. God's word guarantees it. It will cost you comfort because change brings discomfort. And your church may have to invest money to build bigger

facilities and add staff. But if your heart is truly with God's, then the days ahead will be among the most exciting you have ever witnessed.

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

1. Do you have a regular prayer time for the spiritually lost? (Church and/or staff)
2. How have you helped your people prepare their "story"?
3. Are you living a life that is attractive to your neighbors and co-workers? What could you do to improve?
4. What aspects of this article stand out to you? What kinds of things does it inspire you to do?
5. What can your church/staff do better to help your people reach their neighbors and co-workers?