

Editorial: Let's invite people to follow Jesus—beside us

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Could Baptists change more lives by inviting people to follow Jesus than by encouraging them to be born again?

That's a question raised by [church historian Bill Leonard](#). And it's a compelling evangelistic idea.

Baptists and other evangelical Christians often speak a peculiar religious dialect. "Get saved" and "born again" and "repent of your sins" and "rededicate your life" aren't phrases that crop up in most people's conversations.

If you listen as if you did not grow up in church, you wonder how anyone



ever understands enough of it to fall in love with Marv KnoxJesus. Editor

Leonard prodded that peculiarity in a breakout session—"Born Again, Again: Revisiting Religious Experience in a Believers' Church"—at the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship general assembly this summer in Atlanta.

His thesis mirrored the theme of a book he's writing: "Jesus doesn't talk about conversion apart from the kingdom of God." And neither should today's Christians. Because if the conversation isn't clear and tangible and

focused on how Jesus intersects people's lives right now, they just won't get it.

It's a great point. And Leonard is a historian—a professor of church history at Wake Forest University divinity school—so he set the context for Baptists.

Anabaptists and Puritans

Baptists' 17th century cousins, the Anabaptists, expected to see both individual and corporate signs of salvation, he said: "The church is made up of those individuals who can testify to some experience of grace. ... And the community is there to tell you when you're not (reflecting grace) and throw you out."

About the same time, the Puritans—who got their name because they wanted to purify the Church of England—emerged. At least some of them made conversion the norm for believers but also baptized infants, who were "children of the elect," or the people God chose for salvation.

"Baptists are second-generation Protestants" and a bit different from Puritans, he noted. Baptists insist "believers must make a profession of faith that qualifies them for baptism." Infants—who cannot state Jesus is their Lord—cannot be baptized. So, the church is composed of believers who have participated in baptism as a sign of their conversion.

Baptists emphasize regeneration—Christians are "made new creations by faith in Christ Jesus," he said. He cited British Baptist historian/theologian [Paul Fiddes](#): "Regeneration means being part of a community in which it is expected members testify to an experience of the grace of God."

Even with all that in common, "Baptists have two contradictory views of salvation," Leonard said.

Arminians and Calvinists

Baptists who most closely follow [Jacobus Arminius](#) think salvation happens when people “repent, believe and get saved,” he reported. “You have enough free will to enable you to accept regeneration. Repentance and faith are followed by regeneration. But if you’re free to get in, you’re free to get out.”

Baptists who follow [John Calvin](#) think salvation happens in the reverse order—“regeneration precedes confession of sin and faith,” he said. “When you’ve been regenerated (an act of God), you can repent and believe.”

Such theological debates have launched entire Christian denominations and splintered others. They contemplate significant issues of understanding God, God’s work in the world and God’s relationship to humans. They’re important for mature Christians to explore and understand.

But let’s face it: They’re not very compelling to unbelievers. A term like “regeneration” makes “born again” sound simple. In fact, explaining “born again” eventually turns back around to explaining “regeneration.”

Cultural expectations

As Leonard noted, cultural events and expectations that helped Americans understand the terms—and consequently facilitated belief in Jesus—have gone extinct or are declining.

For example, revivalism persisted in American culture, particularly in the South, many decades. The public at large knew about revival meetings, which “created a mechanism for telling people how to be saved,” he said. “But by the late 20th century, revivalism as a means of conversionism was gone.”

Similarly, broad support for Sunday school as an institution for nurturing

children has fallen off precipitously, he added.

So, Leonard suggested a change in evangelism. “Instead of beginning with Nicodemus and people needing to be ‘born again,’ let’s begin with Jesus on the seashore: ‘Come. Follow me.’”

“We live in a time where people aren’t only biblically illiterate, but they’re Jesus illiterate,” he insisted. “One of the great gifts to a world in which one of three Millennials is a ‘none’ (relates to no religious group) is the power of the gospel, of telling them, ‘The kingdom of God has come near.’”

That sounds a lot like the gospel. Good news.

The best way for non-Christians to believe and accept the nearness of God’s kingdom is if they see it expressed practically in our lives. If we live like Jesus—love like Jesus—before them.

Following Jesus

If we embrace the label “Christian,” then let’s be what it actually means. Let’s be “little Christs”—the visible, tangible expression of Jesus. On behalf of Jesus, we can build positive, winsome, compelling relationships. Rather than engage in theological debate or, worse, spout religious gobbledygook, let’s help people feel Jesus’ love and acceptance by the way we love and accept them.

Let’s walk so close to Jesus that when our non-Christian friends walk with us, they will realize they’re walking with him.

That’s clear, compelling evangelism for the 21st century.