

# PERSPECTIVE

DECEMBER 2018



## EVANGELIZING **NOMINAL** CHRISTIANS

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Aaron Menikoff	



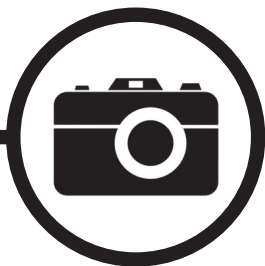
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# Evangelizing Nominal Christians

I met Chris in the late 90s. He'd been coming to church for a few weeks and expressed an interest in getting more involved. The more we talked, the more obvious it became Chris didn't grasp the gospel. He called himself a Christian but misunderstood the basics. I invited him to study the Bible with me. He agreed, and we went to work.

After several long conversations, Chris matter-of-factly concluded, "Aaron, I'm glad we've had these Bible studies. Before we started, I would have said I'm a Christian, and now I know I'm not."

Unfortunately, Chris stopped attending church. His departure discouraged me. Like the rich young ruler (Mark 10:17–27), Chris found following Jesus too costly. He loved the world. Though I was (and am) sad about how our relationship ended, I'm grateful he finally understood what Christianity is all about. Who knows, maybe the gospel seeds planted in those studies have come to bear fruit in his life.

## WHAT IS A NOMINAL CHRISTIAN?

When I first met him, Chris was a nominal Christian. "Nominal" is an adjective meaning "being such in name only" or "so-called." A nominal Christian isn't actually a Christian. A nominal Christian bears the name of Christ, claims to be a follower of Christ but doesn't actually know Christ.

Jesus anticipated the presence of nominal followers. He knew so-called disciples would emerge, men and women who declare their allegiance to him but don't have saving knowledge of him. Matthew 7:21–23 is a terrifying passage. Jesus said:

Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord," will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?" And then will I declare to them, "I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness."

Like Chris, these "disciples" did many good things. But their miracles weren't evidence of saving faith. A true

Christian does the will of his Father. Those who truly believe, truly obey—however imperfectly. Saving faith is the result of a changed heart, and a changed heart produces a godly character. Jesus warns against those who think they are living for Jesus but haven't really put their faith in him.

## INOCULATION PROBLEM

I'm not sure how many people like Chris there are in the world today, but I suspect quite a few. Wherever churches exist people will be confused about what, exactly, it means to be a Christian. Sometimes this is because they don't listen well. They hear the whole gospel but, because of their unbelief, half-truths impale their minds.

Often it's the fault of churches and Christian teachers. Sometimes they exacerbate the problem of faux belief by trivializing Christian conversion—boiling it down to praying a prayer or walking an aisle. This is the inoculation problem.

We inoculate our children against a disease by injecting a tiny dose of a virus into their system. The measles vaccine, for example, contains a bit of the measles itself. In a sense, you give a kid a little of the measles, so he doesn't get a lot of the measles.

What happens when you give a kid a little of the gospel? In other words, what happens when you tell someone Jesus came to save him, but don't tell him he has to give up his sin? You wind up with nominal Christians—people who said a prayer of salvation without every actually being saved.

You've probably seen it happen. Someone is told to go to church faithfully, to be good, to read the Bible, to receive Jesus into his heart. He's told heaven is his reward. He decides to follow Christ, but he doesn't have a biblical understanding of what this means. Unfortunately, he's given false assurance by others that he's truly a follower of Christ. This isn't *biblical* conversion. This inoculation problem is summarized nicely by pastor Michael Lawrence:

Calling people to "make a decision" without calling them to repent not only risks creating a false convert, it also risks vaccinating a person against the real gospel. They think they already have Christianity. Then we double down by saying, "Once saved, always saved."<sup>1</sup>

What a devastating mistake! You probably have neighbors going through life ignoring the true gospel of Jesus Christ because they think they already have it.

### HOW DO WE EVANGELIZE?

I live in Atlanta, the heart of the Bible Belt. Here, church attendance is largely welcomed. Though Atlanta is becoming increasingly secular, it remains a safe and comfortable place to be a Christian. Like an orchid flourishing in the warmth of a greenhouse, nominal Christians thrive in this city. But you don't have to be in the South to find nominal Christians. Wherever you live, there are nominal Christians nearby, and they need the gospel just as much as Hindus, Muslims, and atheists do.

So how should we evangelize our nominal-Christian friends? Let me offer five imperatives.

#### *First, check your heart for pride.*

Be sensitive to the existence of nominal Christianity without being skeptical of the faith of everyone you meet. Yes, it's important to fight for the purity of the church. But it's also crucial to begin by examining one's own heart. Otherwise, our evangelism toward nominal Christians will be marked by a tone of arrogance. Let passages like this sink in:

- ✦ 2 Corinthians 13:5, "Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves."
- ✦ 2 Peter 1:10, "Therefore, brothers, be all the more diligent to make your calling and election sure, for if you practice these qualities, you will never fall."
- ✦ Luke 6:42, "How can you say to your brother, 'Brother, let me take out the speck that is in your eye,' when you yourself do not see the log that is in your own eye?"

Work especially hard to be humble as you evangelize nominal Christians. You are simply, as one Christian put it long ago, "one beggar telling another beggar where he found bread."

If you think your friend is a Christian in-name-only, approach him or her with a spirit of deep humility. Make it clear you're not yet who you ought to be. This is the proper posture of a faithful evangelist, but it is especially important when you are making the audacious claim that what a person thinks about himself is actually wrong.

#### *Second, be clear about the gospel's demands.*

In order to challenge nominal Christianity, you have to recognize it. This requires understanding the serious demands of the gospel. We may fail to urge nominal Christians to follow Christ because we aren't committed to the necessity of holiness in a Christian's life.

Is our view of sin simply too shallow? J. C. Ryle pled with his readers to take sin seriously. He recognized a day approached when we'd have no other choice:

Nothing, I am convinced, will astonish us so much, when we awake in the resurrection day, as the view we shall have of sin, and the retrospect we shall take of our own countless shortcomings and defects. Never till the hour when Christ comes the second time shall we fully realize the "sinfulness of sin."<sup>2</sup>

Holiness is not the fount of Christianity, but it is the fruit. It's not a requirement to *become* a Christian, but all Christians will grow in holiness. A nominal Christian probably isn't aware of this. He or she needs to be taught.

Evangelizing a nominal Christian looks different than evangelizing someone who doesn't profess to be a believer. A nominal Christian will likely affirm the ABC's of the gospel. He may not, however, understand its implications.

A careful study of 1 John is an excellent place to show a nominal Christian that every true Christian has an orthodox knowledge of Christ, a real walk of holiness in Christ, and a genuine love for the body of Christ. Depending on your relationship with the nominal Christian, consider reading Mike McKinley's excellent book, *Am I Really a Christian?*<sup>3</sup>

No Christian is perfect. Let's be clear about that! But part of evangelizing a nominal Christian is teaching that no Christian remains the same. He is always growing in godliness, by Christ's "divine power" (2 Pet. 1:3).

#### *Third, take them at their word.*

When I first started reading the Bible with Chris, I had reservations about the depth of his walk with Christ. I didn't know he *was* a Christian, but at the same time, I didn't know he *wasn't*. My point in having a Bible study with him was not necessarily to do evangelism. I simply trusted that if Chris were a Christian, he would love God's Word and want to follow it. In that sense, I treated him as I would treat any Christian. As the study went

on, Chris saw for himself that his profession of faith was hollow.

It may be wise, as you evangelize, to treat someone you suspect of being a nominal Christian as a true Christian.<sup>4</sup> This is especially true if, from the outside at least, this person is living an upstanding life. Treating him as a believer is a way to test his or her profession of faith while pointing him to Christ.

What do Christians love to do? They love to meditate on Scripture, pray to the Lord, gather with God's people, talk about God's plan of redemption, sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, and walk in holiness. Though we all fall short, and though there are moments when our emotions refuse to keep pace with our convictions, this is the heartbeat of every Christian.

If God put nominal Christians in your life, push them toward what you know true Christians love. Instead of simply treating them as unbelievers—the way you would treat an atheist you met in the park—treat them as children of the King. Ask them questions to get to know them better and to start probing their heart:

- Where do you go to church?
- What do you love about the Bible?
- When did you first understand and believe the gospel?
- Do you want to read the Bible together, with me?

For a Christian, these questions are normal. But for an unbeliever, these questions will usually be met with resistance, coldness, or even hostility. It is in the midst of these objections that fruitful and clarifying evangelistic conversations begin.

As a pastor, I regularly lead church membership interviews. Sometimes, after an extended conversation with someone (like my conversation with Chris), I may decide I don't know the person well enough to affirm he or she is a Christian. In moments like this, instead of moving ahead in the membership process, I'll often ask, "Would you like to read the Bible with someone?" This answer to this question is telling. Someone may be offended that I put up a roadblock to joining the church. But it's also possible he's actually offended by my Savior who said, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."

In summary, if I think someone may be a nominal

Christian, I will often take him at his word, point him to the cross of Christ, and pray the Spirit makes the cost of discipleship clear.

#### *Fourth, be willing to challenge.*

Evangelism is more than presenting the good news. As Mack Stiles so helpfully put it, evangelism is "teaching the gospel with the aim to persuade."<sup>5</sup>

The Apostle Peter didn't just tell people what Jesus did; he *persuaded* them to put their faith in Jesus. Consider Peter's evangelistic message to the household of Cornelius. Cornelius believed a great deal about God, but he'd never submitted his life to Christ. Peter persuaded him to follow Christ by warning him of the last day where Christ will be seen as "judge of the living and the dead" (Acts 10:42–43). Peter challenged Cornelius.

Challenging a nominal Christian to believe in Christ is hard, but it has to be done. One way we persuade nominal Christians is by warning them of God's coming wrath and urging them to turn from their sin and trust in the Lord.

Challenging takes a bit of gumption. You may be accused of legalism and judgmentalism. That's never pleasant! This is why the first step in evangelizing nominal Christians is working on the pride in your own heart. But we'll never really evangelize our nominal Christian friends unless we warn them of God's coming wrath.

If you are feeling timid, just re-read Matthew 7:21–23. When it comes to challenging nominal Christians, you're in good company.

#### *Fifth, continue to love.*

In the process of evangelizing a nominal Christian, you may run into a Chris—someone genuinely thankful to know he isn't a Christian. Keep on loving him. I'm sorry I lost touch with Chris. I should have loved him better by pursuing him harder.

Perhaps, in your evangelism of nominal Christians, you'll run into someone that is so offended you'd question his faith he'll have nothing to do with you. Don't get angry. Don't despair. Keep loving him, too. Where appropriate, keep reaching out. You never know how God may use your witness to one day bring your friend to saving faith.



## CONCLUSION

Atlanta is in a part of the country with a long history of Christianity. Like many other southern cities, Atlanta is known for its church-going population and its many, seeker-sensitive congregations. In this environment, there is an especially large number of people who have, as Lawrence put it, been vaccinated against the real gospel.

I came to Atlanta, in part, to be a missionary to nominal Christians. But I need to be careful. It's easy to be judgmental toward those who are less theologically-minded or simply less mature. It's important to keep this distinction in mind.

Some weaker brothers and sisters genuinely know the Lord but have simply never experienced solid discipleship. In other words, there's a difference between an unbeliever and a weak believer. It can take the wisdom of Solomon to know which is which. Simply being aware that the difference exists may keep you from hastily concluding your friend doesn't know the Lord.

In the meantime, if there are nominal Christians in your life, God has given you an open door to share the gospel. Kindly point them to Jesus. Model the sweetness of a genuine relationship with Christ. Pray, wait, and watch God work.

– Aaron Menikoff

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Lawrence, *Conversion: How God Creates a People* (Crossway, 2018), 53.

<sup>2</sup> J. C. Ryle, *Holiness* (Moody, 2010), 29.

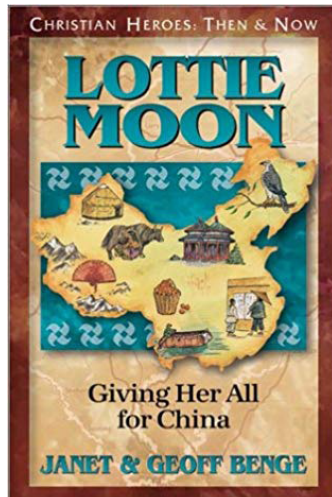
<sup>3</sup> There are exceptions to this rule. For example, I'd discourage you from dating a nominal Christian and from allowing a nominal Christian into church membership.

<sup>4</sup> J. Mack Stiles, *Evangelism: How the Whole Church Speaks of Jesus* (Crossway, 2014), 26.

## ***Lottie Moon: Giving Her All for China***

Written by Janet & Geoff Benge

Bookstall Price: \$10



Baptists are familiar with Lottie Moon's name because of the Christmas missions offering titled in her honor. Many of us might not know the meaningful ways God used this faithful and determined woman to bring about much-needed change for Southern Baptist missionaries. *Lottie Moon: Giving Her All for China* presents a phenomenal opportunity to get to know the namesake behind our annual Christmas giving. Her story is striking for three reasons:

*She was an unlikely missionary.* Although her father was a deacon of their church, Lottie was not interested in God growing

up. She was skeptical towards Christianity after seeing denominational arguments, and she even mocked Christian girls at school. Yet God intervened while Lottie was in college and gave her ears to hear.

*She was a persistent missionary.* At the time of the Civil War, Baptists did not send single women to overseas missions assignments. Lottie's younger sister broke that tradition in 1872 and Lottie quickly joined her, stationed in Tengchow, China. Over 39 years of service, Lottie became well-versed in the realities of missionary life. In addition to teaching and evangelizing, she channeled her energy into regularly writing back to the Southern Baptists' Foreign Missions Board. Lottie described the spiritual hunger of the Chinese people, the urgent need for more workers, and the difficult conditions. Her repeated pleas for better policies eventually led to a transformation of the support given to Southern Baptist missionaries.

*She was a faithful missionary.* Sometimes the fruit was visible and plentiful. Whole villages heard the gospel for the first time, responding with many questions about Jesus. Chinese believers shared the "Jesus way" with their families and neighbors, despite the danger. New churches were planted. But even in the harvest, the missionaries were frequently mocked as "foreign devils". They suffered from mental and physical health issues under the staggering amount of work, lack of furloughs, and loneliness. Despite these hardships, Lottie remained committed to the Chinese people and facing the task unfinished.

Missionary biographies often showcase ordinary people making weighty sacrifices to participate in making Christ's name known across cultures. This book is no different! I found it immensely helpful and challenging to read about Lottie's convictions, her struggles, and her continual prayers to the Lord of the harvest.

— RECOMMENDED BY KATRINA KANODE

### Excerpts From the Book

# 1

"Lottie smiled brightly and took a seat near the front, ready to pick holes in the sermon the Reverend Broadus was about to deliver. Much to her surprise, by the end of the homily she had not found a single thing that didn't make sense to her."

— The Most Educated Woman in the South, p.38

# 2

"She wrote about all the missionaries and their children who had died in China, about the dreadful diseases that were so easily contracted there, about the violence of local militias toward missionaries, and about the stress of living in a totally foreign environment. She encouraged the mission board to be a little more understanding of its missionaries. Indeed, Lottie felt as passionate about educating Baptists concerning the realities of missionary life as she did educating Chinese people about the Christian life."

— Fallen Apart, p.105

# 3

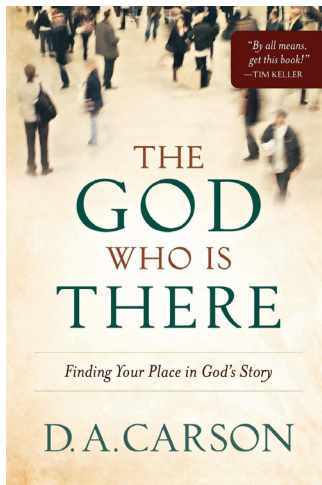
"She was proud of the way these Chinese Christians were taking ownership of their church and reaching out to others on their own initiative with the gospel."

— Dark Times, p.158

## The God Who Is There

Written by D. A. Carson

Bookstall Price: \$14



It is quite an accomplishment to run through the entire storyline of the Bible in 14 relatively short chapters (225 pages total). But then again this is D.A. Carson, the scholar, seminary professor, and author/editor of over 50 books. In his beautifully written book, *The God Who Is There*, Carson starts from the creation account in Genesis 1 and moves through the entire Bible to the final triumphant vision of the new heaven and earth, the New Jerusalem and the consummated union between Christ and his people. In each chapter, he uses one or more key Bible passages to show

us something about God's character, attributes, and purposes—building connections and drawing lines that all converge in Jesus.

Carson covers all the major events in God's story of redemptive history. In the chapters dealing with the Old Testament, he clearly explains how God's purposes in the Covenants, the Mosaic Law, the promise of an everlasting kingdom in the line of David, the wisdom literature and the prophets all were foreshadowing and pointing to Christ.

In the preface to the book, Carson tells us that he wrote it primarily for those who have very little prior acquaintance with the Bible. The simple language, straightforward presentation and the addressing of common 21st-century objections to the Christian faith make this a great book to go through with a friend with whom you want to share the gospel.

Although this material was originally developed for those less acquainted with the Bible, I wholeheartedly recommend it for even the mature Christian. Soaking in a rich retelling of the greatest of all stories about the God we love is a joyful experience for any Christian and will make your heart glad.

Carson is an accomplished teacher and unpacks the Bible in a clear and compelling way. His poignant exposition of John 20:24-28 in the chapter on Christ's death and resurrection (chapter 10), which relates Jesus' tender response to Thomas' doubt, is an example of his skill as a teacher of God's Word and is worth the price of this book.

Get this book and read it for your own joy in the Lord and use it as a tool to share the gospel with your neighbor.

— RECOMMENDED BY JACK LUPAS

### Excerpts From the Book

## 1

"But if our first and most serious need is to be reconciled to God — a God who now stands over against us and pronounces death upon us because of our willingly chosen rebellion — then what we need the most, though we may have all of these other derivative needs, is to be reconciled to him. We need someone to save us."  
— *The God Who Does Not Wipe Out Rebels*, p.41

## 2

"Do you want to know what the character of God is like? Study Jesus. Do you want to know what the holiness of God is like? Study Jesus. Do you want to know what the wrath of God is like? Study Jesus. Do you want to know what the forgiveness of God is like? Study Jesus. Do you want to know what the glory of God is like? Study Jesus all the way to the wretched cross. Study Jesus."  
— *The God Who Becomes a Human Being*, p.117

## 3

"All the other Biblical descriptions of the final state, everything that is said in other parts of the Bible about the work we will do and about our increased joy and responsibility and about the peacefulness of everything...as wonderful as these prospects may be, they all pale in comparison of this vision of the sheer Godhood of God, which consumes us and empowers us and leaves us perpetually transformed."  
— *The God Who Triumphs*, p.223



# DECEMBER

*These Scripture readings have been selected to help you prepare for the Sunday morning message. Take Up & Read!*

December 1	1 Kings 19:9–18	December 17	2 Samuel 7:1–17
<b>December 2</b>	<b>Mark 14:32–42</b>	December 18	Isaiah 9:1–7
December 3	Acts 11:1–18	December 19	Luke 1:1–25
December 4	Acts 11:19–30	December 20	Luke 1:26–45
December 5	Acts 12:1–17	December 21	Luke 1:46–56
December 6	Luke 22:47–62	December 22	Luke 1:57–80
December 7	Psalms 33:1–9	<b>December 23</b>	<b>Luke 2:1–20</b>
December 8	Psalms 33:10–22	December 24	Psalms 111
<b>December 9</b>	<b>Acts 12:1–17</b>	December 25	Psalms 92
December 10	Acts 12:1–17	December 26	Psalms 104:1–13
December 11	Acts 12:18–25	December 27	Psalms 104:14–30
December 12	2 Samuel 24:1–9	December 28	Psalms 104:31–35
December 13	2 Samuel 24:10–17	December 29	Philippians 4:1–9
December 14	2 Samuel 24:18–25	<b>December 30</b>	<b>Psalms 111</b>
December 15	Psalms 110	<b>*Sermons in bold</b>	
<b>December 16</b>	<b>Acts 12:18–25</b>		

# TAKE UP & READ

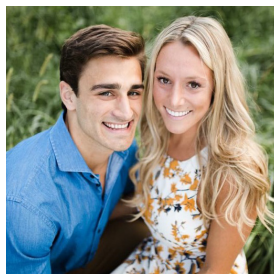


# NEW MEMBERS

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Fidel Agbor



Jacob & Carli  
Anderson



Butler Brewer



Matt Calvert



Alex & Laura  
Cramer  
Hudson (2)  
Susanna (2)



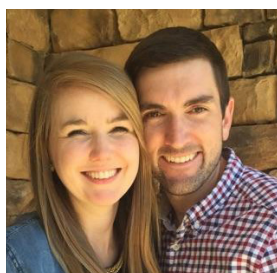
Natalie  
Fernandez



Bill & Jenny  
Griscom



Grace Roberts



Dan & Meredith  
Ryder



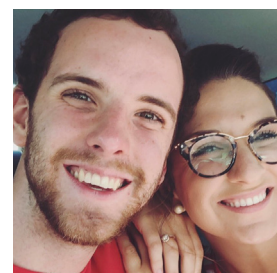
Evan & Ashley  
Taylor



David Thompson



Wesley Toler



Matt & Kayla  
Williams



*Mount Vernon*  
BAPTIST CHURCH