

This is an excerpt from *Youth Evangelism: Reaching Young People in a way that Honours God*

Basketball for Jesus: Is it an option

Example-

Lately I have heard of some churches running evangelistic basketball competitions. This is clearly advertised as a “time to get together to play basketball, have a great time and hear about Jesus”. The night is spent shooting hoop (that’s a trendy way of talking about basketball) and then somewhere in the program someone will stand and giving a gospel presentation. They base their talk around Jesus being the real goal of life or some other topic that tries to be connected to the activity. Sounds quite harmless and many are using this strategy regularly. The two questions I must ask are “Is this a strategy that God would want us to use?” And, “Is this the best way to reach young people for Christ?” No, it another example of the old bait and switch model of evangelism. Attract them with one thing and then give them another.

What’s wrong with this style of evangelism?

You may be asking, “C’mon Ken, what is wrong with this? If people are hearing about Jesus this is fantastic! Who cares about whether it is through a soccer competition or a cooking class.” This may appear to be a fair comment. However, it is important to think through a couple of things.

How do you “threaten unthreateningly?”

Those who defend the “basketball” model of evangelism do so with an odd logic. They will tell you that while the message of the cross is threatening, we need to run some sort of event designed to be unthreatening. People just do not come to church functions anymore- most people have never been to church so the fear is that they won’t feel comfortable with any event that is held there. Therefore we must do something like run a basketball competition or a sport day to make them feel welcomed. This will be a bridge to church that will be friendly and introduce the non-Christian to some Christians. Some will tell you that we need to have a “dangerous message in a safe environment”.

Clearly some of this argument is true. Many people don't go to church and don't feel comfortable there. The problem is, at some stage you must introduce the newcomer to the message of Jesus. This is the message that will challenge much of what he/she believes and is intrinsically threatening. If this event is supposed to be nonthreatening it follows that we must leave out the threatening message. You and I both know that we can't do this. In fact, we must realise that our whole existence is threatening because our King is seeking to establish his kingdom instead of the kingdom of this world. It is virtually impossible to be unthreatening. If we do, we have ceased to be effective. This logic of "dangerous message in a safe place" has always seemed a bit odd to me. I have sat through dozens of outreach events that were designed to attract the non-Christian and to not be too threatening. Towards the end of the night the speaker gives a talk on how we are all sinners and are facing the judgement of an angry God. If we do not repent we will suffer in hell eternally. I must tell you that I wholeheartedly agree with the message. However, we try our hardest to attract the outsider and then we hit them with an extremely "in your face talk".

We must figure out how to reach this world and not compromise who we are, what we do as Christians or the message we preach.

It only appeals to those interested in what is offered

If the church is running a basketball competition this excludes anyone who is not interested in the activity. Many Christians are passionate about Jesus but not interested in basketball. I have spoken to a number of Christians who are frustrated when their church runs evangelistic outreaches built around activities that only appeal to a certain segment of the church. Similarly, not all non-Christians care about sport. If we make the entry level to the Christian faith built around certain activities we are only appealing to a limited group. It is up to us to work out how to bring the call of Jesus to the widest number of people.

Do we need to run a program that apologises for evangelism?

If I say to my friend, "Would you like to come to a Christian sport day? We will shoot some hoop and have a great time! Oh, and by the way there will be someone who will bring a short message about the Christian faith. Is that okay?" There are two problems here. First, if my friend is switched on they will wonder about is the connection between basketball and my religion (certainly if they don't we should). Many non-Christians will find this confusing. They

may also wonder if we are somehow ashamed of our faith. In any case it will imprint upon them the fact that to tell them about Jesus we need to something that is totally unrelated to the message. We must never confuse a nonbeliever into thinking that following Jesus is about something other than following Jesus. Lifesavers are all about saving lives, politicians are into politics, musicians love music. Christians are about following Jesus.

Second, and this is much more important, if my friend does actually agree to come along why do I need the basketball anyway? If they have seen my faith and questioned me about it or we have discussed Christian things before they may come to a Christian event if asked. In the end, why do we need the sporting bait?. I firmly believe it is due to two things; many of us are not confident of the power of God in the gospel (Rom. 1:16, 17); and many of us have not learned how to run an evangelistic program that is not built on worldly entertainment.

The golden rule is simple. If you want someone to hear about Jesus invite them to an event or gathering that is focussed on telling people about Jesus. Do not invite them to something that is about something else with a message of Jesus thrown in.

Why has youth ministry gone down the road of basketball competitions in the name of evangelism? How do we get around this problem? How would the early church or the Apostle Paul deal with this? Hey, what would Jesus do?

The problem is not as difficult as we imagine. It lies in four simple strategies.

1. We must engage in evangelism on their turf. Train up your young people (and your old people!) to be confident in personal evangelism. We must go to where they are- the sporting fields, the work place, school, parties etc. Our churches and youth groups must be filled with people who are able to witness in any setting.

2. We must be different because we are different. If we are living a lifestyle that reflects our faith in Jesus this will be apparent to our friends and associates. This may lead to many fruitful opportunities to evangelise or invite someone to an evangelistic function.

3. Invite them into your life. Eat with them, see movies with them, have them over for a meal with some of your Christian friends. If some of the youth group kids are getting together for a video or pizza that is a great time for a non-Christian young person to come along.

4. Finally, we need to make our youth groups and churches a place where newcomers are welcome and encouraged to attend. We need to be friendly and welcoming. This doesn't mean however, that we water down our message or put on entertainment for them. The gospel is threatening and can make people feel uncomfortable. This goes with the territory. Many non-Christians will come to our groups and feel welcome yet still not like our message. It is okay for them to walk away.