

I understand that English-speaking people have a metaphorical idiom – “the elephant in the room.” It means an obvious problem that everyone knows about, but nobody wants to discuss.

I’ve never seen an elephant, but I understand they are maybe five or ten times as big as a Roman chariot horse. And, our rooms are much smaller than yours, so I get the picture of how big a problem an elephant in the room really is. It obscures your view and creates other problems just by not acknowledging that it exists.

We early Christian leaders had an elephant in the room. We did not have that metaphor though, so we used another one. I call it... the George Foreman Grill Problem. Let me illustrate it by telling you of an imaginary conversation that James and I could have had when I returned to Jerusalem after an evangelism trip.

I show up for church on Sunday as I’ve done for years. A typical Sunday, not Easter, not Super Bowl Sunday. Just a typical Sunday. I wait and wait for the typical large crowd to show up, but there is a much smaller group than I expect. As I think about it, I realize the crowds have been dwindling for some time, but I have refused to acknowledge it. I go over to James and point out what I see.

James nods sadly, and says, “It’s the George Foreman Grill Problem.”

I’m completely baffled. “George Foreman Grill Problem? I love my George Foreman Grill! What does that have to do with church attendance?”

James smiles, “Of course you love your grill, Barnabas. So do many thousands of other people. That’s the problem.”

I know James is leading me into a trap, but I can’t see where he is going. “What --- is ---- the ---- problem?”

“In its first fifteen years, over 100 million George Foreman Grills were snapped up by excited new owners. Everyone was SO excited when they got their grill. Over time, the excitement faded. As the new wore off, the drudgery and work of maintenance, cleaning, and daily use made them less attractive. Almost all of those grills have been broken, abandoned, or forgotten in some cabinet. People are excited to get them, but most don’t stay that enthusiastic for very long.”

When James finishes, I just stare at him. I know he is right. We Christians have the George Forman Grill Problem to the extreme. We spend all of our time in a life-and-death race to make disciples, but we do not retain nearly as many as we should. Persecution, false teachings, pressure from family members and peers, the daily sameness of living as Christians should. Belief turns to doubt, faithfulness turns to disinterest. New believers are so excited at first, but so many fall away.

Now, I'm not talking about theological ideas about salvation or what it takes to go to heaven. I just want to talk about the reality of how hard it is to keep people on their path as disciples, devoted to Jesus. If you look for it, you see that we [the] New Testament writers obliquely addressed the topic over and over, but it was like an elephant in the room. We wanted to talk about adding Christians, but were reluctant to discourage our members by talking about the ones who dropped out.

Before you think I am exaggerating the problem, let me put some numbers to it. On the first day of the church's existence, we had about three thousand added to our number, so we had more than 3,500 believers.¹ Not long after, we had about 5,000 men believers, along with a lot of women, which surely totaled at least 6,000.² With that start and with just a paltry 20% growth rate per year, we would have had three-and-a-half million believers by the year 65 AD. Instead, we *maybe* had believers totaling a few tens of thousands of people.

We were doing pretty well about going to the whole world to preach about Jesus, but we were not doing so well about actually making disciples of the whole world.

Once, Jesus gave a particularly difficult teaching. On hearing it, many of his disciples said it was a hard teaching. So difficult that they wondered who could accept it. From that time on, many of his disciples turned back and did not follow him any longer.³ Jesus did not soften his message. He knew the importance of having completely dedicated followers. And, the importance of NOT having followers who were not completely dedicated, such as Judas.

Jesus foretold what was going to happen to many in his famous parable of the Sower.⁴ The seeds on the path represent those who hear the Gospel but never fully understand it or become committed to it. We lost many people like that.

The seeds on the rocky ground referred to those who heard the Gospel and received it with joy. But, they did not get deeply rooted, so they went away in times of trouble or persecution. We lost many people like that. But we knew persecution was coming, so we [the] New Testament writers often warned about enduring through persecution. We did not send soft warnings

¹ Acts 2:41 plus at least 500 pre-existing disciples

² Acts 4:4

³ John 6:60-66

⁴ Matthew 13:18-22

either. Like with Jesus' followers while he was alive, many of the early Christians decided to quit following Jesus just at the threat of persecution or hard times.

It was pretty easy to warn and teach against the obvious negatives of being a Christian in the Roman Empire and in Israel. What we leaders were not expecting was the people represented by the seed falling among the thorns. Jesus said they were unfruitful because of the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth.

Paul had a most painful experience with this type of falling away with a good friend. When he wrote *Colossians* and *Philemon*, one of his dear fellow workers was Demas.⁵ A few years later, when Paul wrote *Second Timothy*, he complained that Demas had deserted him because Demas loved this world.⁶ I guess Demas was tired of not having a lot of money. Tired of not being popular with others outside of the church. Tired of living a life worthy of the Lord Jesus.

We early Christians had another very large issue. Almost all of the Christians for the first many years were Jews. After they became Christians, there was constant pressure from the Jewish authorities for them to return to Judaism. While they were Christians they were under severe social and economic pressure to return to Judaism. Sometimes they and their families were restricted from the Temple and synagogues. Their families often begged them to return to Judaism. Many Jews just tired of the plainness of our worship, and returned to the lavish Temple.

It would have been bad enough if we had just lost our members back to Judaism, but not all of them went back. Many of them stayed Christians and just tried to make Christians adhere to the customs and laws of Judaism. These Judaizers were very persuasive and caused great confusion. They caused many Christians to lose the freedom they had gained. They even confused Peter and me once, to my great regret.⁷ We lost many Christians to false teachers and Judaism.

So, we Christian leaders had two interrelated problems. How could we keep Christians inspired and growing, and being active in the church? And, how could we make sure as many people as possible had the opportunity to receive salvation and eternal life? In order for our movement to flourish, both of those questions had to be addressed and solved.

As you read the New Testament letters, keep these two interrelated questions in mind. You will see how we encourage people to be an active part of their church, and encourage them to believe and act in such a way as to receive eternal salvation. We are not always talking about complex doctrinal issues and salvation issues. Sometimes we are just talking about the simple

⁵ Colossians 4:14 and Philemon 1:24

⁶ 2 Timothy 4:10

⁷ Galatians 2:11

fact we wanted...and needed...for people to be faithful members of their church. We needed to be able to have access to them, and we needed them to help us make disciples.

We needed to develop a very strong base, because the Holy Spirit was preparing the church for a huge growth spurt.

Quick...name all of the books of the Bible written by Jesus. Oh, you can't name any? No wonder, he didn't write any of them. Ok, now name all of the famous verses in the Bible written by Jesus. Oh, you can't name any? No wonder, he didn't write any of them, well, write them "down". Our only record of him writing down anything is when he wrote something in the dust.⁸

In your house you may have many Bibles, your cell phone may even have a Bible app on it, and your bookstores are loaded with Bibles. However, in 65 AD, the New Testament had not been compiled, and there were few copies in existence of the contents that had been written.

It is extremely hard to grow a religious movement without having specific sacred writings. As they progressed onward from 65 AD, church leaders wrote more letters and gospels, and were more intent on gathering and passing around the things that had already been written. These writings would comprise the bulk of the New Testament, and be very influential in converting and retaining true disciples of Christ.

Through the leading of Holy Spirit, we addressed our elephant in the room. We set the stage for a huge growth in the number of Christians.

The elephant in your collective room is the same one we had. Fewer and fewer people today believe it is important to go to church or to be active with their faith. This is proven both by polls and church attendance. And maybe it's for different reasons than in my time, or maybe, many of the same. I wonder how will you address the elephant in the room?

⁸ John 8:1-8