

# People Who Are Opposed to the Gospel Are Not Opposed to Ice Cream

by Josh Hunt

**Note: this is a chapter from a my book [You Can Double Your Class in Two Years or Less](#), to be released January of 1997 by Group Publishers.**

Donald McGavran, the father of the modern Church Growth Movement laid the foundation for all church growth thinking that was to follow. His message could be summarized, in part, by saying, "Most of the barriers to the Gospel are not theological, they are social."<sup>(1)</sup>

To paraphrase Juan Carlos Ortiz, "Most people who are opposed to the Gospel are not opposed to ice cream."<sup>(2)</sup>

The greatest unmet need in your community is love. People crave fellowship and love. They want to know and to be known; to love and to be loved. They want to socialize and talk and listen and share and laugh. They want to have deep, personal friends with whom they can be totally honest. They also want to have a casual friends who will support them. They want people they can enjoy football games with and enjoy meals with. We do this at fellowships or parties. We need people with the gift of party to help us with the evangelistic and disciple making process.

When we love people and when we spend time with them and party with them, they become much more open to hearing about the Gospel.

People are more like sheep than eagles. That is what Jesus taught. The implication is that most people prefer to run with the crowd than to fly alone. This is why the testimonial is so popular and effective in advertising. We are willing to go along with others simply because others are going along. Let me give you an example.

We all know about Marxism. Most Americans are opposed to Marxism. Yet who among us has studied its tenets well enough to say we have given Marxism an honest chance for our consideration? We simply reject it out of hand. I have never given Marxism careful, personal consideration with a view to adopting its tenets. I will bet you have not either. It is easy because most of us don't know any Marxists anyway.

We know something of the Hindu faith. We know it exists. We know millions of people have embraced it. Yet, we have not looked seriously at becoming a Hindu. Why? One reason is that most of us do not know any Hindus.

Perhaps a better example is Mormonism. Suppose you move to Salt Lake City. Everyone you work with is Mormon. Your neighbors are all Mormons. The people on your softball team, Mormons. You come to have some genuine friends who are Mormons. Then, to your surprise, your entire family become Mormons. Don't you think you would look at Mormonism in a completely new light? For the first time in your life, you would give Mormonism some serious thought, don't you think?

I would. If all my family and friends became Mormons, I would think about Mormonism as I have never thought about it before. Why? Because we are all influenced by the beliefs of our friends. Most people are followers. They like to believe what all their friends and family believe.

What does all this mean for evangelism and church growth? Everything.

The key to fulfilling the Great Commission is to go across the social barrier before we try to cross the theological barrier. If we would consider Mormonism because many of our friends were Mormon, we can surmise that many will consider Christianity if we become their friends. People like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic, or social barriers. Many of us have been trained to articulate our faith clearly and effectively. We can say the words of faith, and that is good. But the lost will never hear those words until a friend speaks them. We must love people before we expect them to come to love our Lord. If we want them to believe that God loves them and accepts them, we must love them and accept them.

In practical terms, this means spending time with them. It means inviting them into our homes and going out to dinner with them. We party with the people we love. We will work with anyone, but we spend casual time only with the people we care about. The greatest gift we can give someone is us and our time. If we were half as effective at crossing social barriers as we have been at crossing theological barriers, we would have won the world years ago. The reason we have not won our country and our communities is that we simply do not love them. If we love them, they will come. But they will not cross the barriers; we must go to them. Note that the Great Commission says this, "*Go, make disciples.*"<sup>(3)</sup> (Italics added.) We must take the initiative. We must do the going.

I used to think the problem was on the front end, that we as class members simply did not know enough "pre-Christians." That is certainly true of me. I could count on one hand the number of relationships I have with outsiders. Nevertheless, it is not true of most Christians. I did a survey that revealed that the average person in my class already had five or more persons they considered friends who were not believers. They were not inviting these friends to Sunday school or to class parties. We are not reaching out to them with love, much less with the Gospel. In addition, out of every 100 people who attend worship, two are visitors and are great candidates for inviting. This is true of most churches. I consulted with a church recently that had 4 in 100 who were visitors. Yet, the church was not growing. Why? Simple. We are not loving these visitors. We are not having them in our homes. We are not inviting them to our parties. The greatest unmet need is love. The problem is not that we do not know anyone to love. We have plenty of people to invite. We simply are not doing it.

There is a good reason we are not. We believe we need to invite people to the class itself. If we would double our classes every two years or less, we need to quit thinking so much about inviting people to class. We need to think about inviting people to monthly fellowships. Let me show you what I mean.

Suppose you take on the role of class outreach leader. You are motivated so you take a list of people who have visited the church recently and you invite them to class. None of them come. You call again. Again, they stay away. You send a card. Nothing. You may even visit. You call a third time. No response. This is church life in the trenches. This is how it really is. I know. I have been there and done that.

Now, let me ask you, "How you feel?" My best guess is, "Awkward; really awkward." If you are normal, you will do anything to keep from feeling this way. You want to avoid feeling awkward, so you quit calling. This happens every week in 350,000 churches across America. People mean to invite, and they do invite, but they get tired of inviting to class--or to worship, for that matter--because they don't get a positive response. It begins to feel awkward, so they quit.

What I suggest is to quit inviting people to class. Quit inviting them to church. Invite them to the party. Invite them to go bowling. Invite them out for dinner. Get them on the softball team. What I have found is that if we can get them to the party, we will not keep them away from class.

Evangelism is a group sport. It is something the body does together and is best done in groups. Here is how God taught me this.

Our group needed a bridge to carry the Gospel to our friends. People in our group knew outsiders and we had recent visitors as prospects, but they were not responding to our invitations to attend class. We needed a way to reach them.

Then our group started doing something. We stumbled onto it accidentally. I had not read it in any book; it just seemed the thing to do. We started asking people to invite their friends to our fellowships. We asked them to bring them to play volleyball and go to the beach with us. (In New Mexico, we have a beach, but no ocean. It is called White Sands.) They would record their names and invite them to the next event. (We took a fairly systematic approach to this.) We invited every visitor that was a prospect for our class. Some that were not really prospects for our class, but we invited them anyway. They were officially prospects of the class down the hall. In our church, we encouraged free and open competition between classes. And, of course, we invited our own friends. You know what? They came! We found the bridge and discovered an important principle. If you make people a part of the life of the group, you will not be able to keep them away from the Bible Study. I rarely invited people to come to Bible Study. But once they became part of the group and saw it as "us" instead of "them," their attendance was not a problem.

Why? Because we were meeting a basic human need. We were showing people real love and concern. That is not to say that all of them came every time. Quite the contrary. Lots of them did not come, but enough did come to make it worth our while. Every salesman knows you won't close on every call. The key is to make lots of calls. In addition, we offended very few people. People can be offended by telemarketing or by uninvited visits at their door. But, no one is offended by an invitation to a party. People love to be invited.

This is what normally happens. You invite them to a Valentine's dinner, a bowling party, and a trip to Wet and Wild. Not interested. Later you invite them to play cards, and they come. They like playing cards. The door opens just a smidgen. Next time it is ten times easier for them to come. It is also ten times more likely that they will come to class and be exposed to some half-way decent teaching. Why? Now they are coming to join a bunch of people they already know. They turn you down for several more events. Then they come again. Then you or a member of your class has them to their home. Then another does. Then another. Soon they have a whole group of friends who have all placed their faith in Christ. For the first time in their lives they must consider Christianity seriously.

There are a lot of bored lonely people out there who are hungry for friendship. Fortunately, that is something we have. It is part and parcel of the Gospel. All we need to do is widen the circle--

intentionally. Every time we have people in our home, I ask myself the question, "Is this something I could invite an outsider or a newcomer to?" Often it is not; that is OK. You do not have to invite outsiders to everything. You can have parties to which you do not invite outsiders. But if you want to, really want to double your class every two years to less, invite people to be a part of your life on a regular basis.

A salesman stopped me in the mall the other day and asked, "You work at Calvary, don't you?" I didn't recognize him, but I smiled and replied positively. He let me off the hook, "Oh, I don't expect you to recognize me. I don't attend Calvary anymore." We went about our business. I asked him about the software he was selling, and he answered as any salesman might.

Then he shocked me, "Do you know why I don't go to church [presumably any church] anymore?" "I really would like to know that," I said. "People are only friendly to you at church."

His words cut like a knife. We must do better than that. That is not what it means to be a church. If we do not do any better than that, we don't deserve to be called a church. We must be friends to people inside and outside the church building. That is what the body is about.

Please note that I am not talking about something that will take up a night you do not have. I am not talking about altering a busy life to try to cram something else in. I am talking about including people in the lifestyle you now live. When Jesus called the disciples, He called them to be *with Him* (Mark 3:14). If you aspire to make disciples, you must call people to be with you. Invite people to be with you. Love them. Include them. Hang out. We reduced it to a formula: **INVITE EVERY MEMBER AND EVERY VISITOR TO EVERY FELLOWSHIP EVERY MONTH.** "Every member"--that is inreach. It is developing quality relationships and loving each other. "Every prospect:--that is outreach. It is the stuff of the Great Commission.

The same dynamic of awkwardness that I described earlier with reference to prospects is also true of absentees. One reason most churches have about half their people gone every week is that it becomes awkward to invite them back. If they miss once, we may send a card. If they miss a second time, we may call. We may even pay them a visit (though this would be rare). But before long, if we keep calling and inviting them back to class and saying, "We missed you," it becomes awkward for both sides. So, before long we quit doing it. It seems like obedience to the golden rule to quit inviting them. However, we can invite people to a fellowship every month until Jesus comes and people will appreciate the invitation. It will not be awkward, even if they do not attend. One of these days things will change in their lives and the Spirit of God will begin to woo them back. They will know the door is open for them to come back.

We have had good friends who wandered from the faith for a season. We always tried to keep up with them on an informal, friendship basis. We would have breakfast about once a quarter. It was a little awkward because they had been so active in church life and now they were not. Not being judgmental was difficult, and I knew that on some level, they felt bad. Still, we kept doing it. Eventually, the "hound of heaven" chased them down. Some tragedy came their way, and we were the ones they turned to. I was so glad we had been there throughout those dark years. That is what the church is to be to one another. Paul knew the importance of the body restoring fallen brothers: "**Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted.**" (Galatians 6:1)

How many people can you keep up with on this kind of personal level? Not very many, so we need all hands on deck. We need everyone involved in the business of loving people. Every member a minister.

We often say this, but we fail to explain what it means. It means everyone loving someone. A minister loves and cares for the flock. This is life and friendship we are talking about. It is not a program; it is a way of living. It is loving one another. It is what it means to be the body of Christ. Everyone needs to be loved this way, because we are all capable of falling. Everyone needs to be loved, and it will take everyone loving to get the job done.

You may be wondering what kind of fellowships to do. Before I give you the short list, remember this: whatever you do the first three times will not be all that much fun. After that, most anything will be fun. The reason is simple. This is not about bowling or putt-putt or swimming. It is about being together. People who love to be together don't much care what they do. People who don't love each other feel a little uncomfortable doing almost any activity. O.K., here is the short list of fun things to do: bowling, Putt-Putt, swimming, eat, potluck, go out to eat, picnic, New Year's parties (with lots of snacks), Valentines parties (dinners are nice), eat, Memorial Day picnic, July 4th party, Super Bowl party (will your church let you out of church on Sunday night to do outreach?), the great pumpkin chases, Christmas parties, eat, game night, volleyball, go to the beach. One easy way to plan a year of parties is to plan around all the seasonal events -- Christmas, New Years, Valentines Day, Memorial Day, etc. -- then fill in the gaps with generic events like bowling and Putt-putt.

Dick Murray says it is a myth that most adults attend Sunday school classes primarily to learn. They attend for the fellowships, for the friends, for the life. <sup>(4)</sup>I just dare you to do it and come back in two years and tell me your class did not double in two years or less.

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1. Donald McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1970), pp. 207ff; 223ff.

2. Juan Carlos Ortiz *Disciples*, (Carol Stream, Illinois: Creation House, 1975), p. 58.

3. I have heard a lot of explanations that would want to take this "go" out of the Great Commission. However, my Greek professor, Dr. Curtis Vaughan, explained it to us this way: "Although the only imperative in the verse is the word for 'make disciples' [one word in the Greek], the other participles derive imperative force from the main verb. It is, therefore, proper to translate this as most translations do, 'Go, make disciples.'"

4. Dick Murray, *Strengthening the Adult Sunday school Class*, (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon, 1981), p. 26.