

Herbert Cooper: People's Church, Oklahoma City

By Dean Nelson • 10/21/2011



The senior pastor of one of America's fastest-growing churches, a former traveling evangelist, discusses evangelism in the church today.

Herbert Cooper is the senior pastor of People's Church in Oklahoma City, a 2011 Outreach 100 church (No. 30 Fastest-Growing).

CONNECTION TO OUTREACH: Herbert Cooper is featured in the [November/December 2011](#) issue as "The Outreach Interview." He also was identified as one of 30 emerging influencers in the [September/October 2011](#) issue.

HERBERT SAYS:

How did you come to Christ? How did all of this emphasis on salvation start for you personally?

I grew up going to church, but I was kind of a mutt. Some Church of Christ, some Baptist, but in my junior high years, I just did my own thing. I played football in high

school, and one night I went to a Fellowship of Christian Athletes meeting, where they were serving pizza. That's why I say everything's a tool. The only reason I went to the football locker room that night was for the pizza. The former kicker for the Oklahoma University Sooners sat in a chair and talked in a monotone voice about Jesus and the price He paid. I was a senior, a captain on the football team, about to go on to play college football, and I just cried my eyes out. I had a conversion experience that radically revolutionized my life. Because of that, I saw that Jesus could really take somebody from a broken family and addictions, and make a difference and change a life.



How has the word evangelism changed over the years?

I don't know that the meaning of the word has changed. Maybe the way we have applied it has changed, though. As I said before, the natural gravitational pull is inward. As years go by, it might be easier to try to win the lost by sending a check over to Africa instead of being salt and light in our own communities and inviting our unchurched friends to church and winning them to Christ. Sending money to Africa and taking 20 people a year to Mexico becomes evangelism for some. But how do we win our

own neighborhoods and our own city to Christ? I'm for missions, and we do missions, but we can't forget our communities.

Do you think the conversion experience is emphasized as much as it used to be?

That may vary from individual church to church. Following Jesus includes "you must be born again." It also includes discipleship. But you have to have a conversion experience, then you become a follower.

It seems like the emphasis in a lot of places is on one or the other.

I think it has to be both—conversion and discipleship. We have a new believers class, small groups, even our Sunday teaching is part of equipping the church to become followers of Jesus. But you can't be a follower of Jesus without a conversion experience. You can go on a spiritual journey and seek the truth and kick the tires around it, but at some point you have to cross the line of faith and be converted. From that point on you become a lifelong follower of Jesus.

How does your congregation get involved with personal evangelism in their neighborhoods?

Sunday morning is a key evangelism tool, but our church equips our people for personal evangelism, to build relationships with people who don't know Christ, to connect with the unchurched. I don't feel pressure to be the only one inviting people to know Jesus. I put it on our people and tell them, "You're evangelists, and God is using you. You're light and salt." People are coming to Christ through small groups and through relationships with neighbors.

Do you do some training that says, "Here's how you lead your neighbor to Christ"?

I don't think it's that complicated. You don't even have to know the Bible to share what Jesus has done in your life. I'm not saying you don't need correct theology, but I don't think it's that hard to say to someone, "Here's what God is doing." You could be saved for just a month and tell someone about Jesus. There is nothing more powerful than sharing your own story. That's what the woman at the well did. She said, "I just met a man who told me about my life. Come and see this guy." I encourage our people to be that way.

You have said that in your early days you were too harsh and religious. What does that mean?

When I was a traveling evangelist, I had a heart for evangelism, and people were coming to Christ, but I was just mean and hard. My whole approach came out as harsh and critical and judgmental and condemning. When I preached, I would get up and read these lists of what God's for and what He's against. I just had a different spirit. I would preach down to people, like I had it together and they didn't. Then I started this church and got around real unchurched people and thought, "Man, I'm condemning them." I'm not the Holy Spirit. I teach truth, but I want to do it in love and grace.

You used evangelism as a weapon?

I was mean. I didn't have the compassion I see in Jesus. In the first couple of years of pastoring this church, God just ripped that spirit out of my heart. Jesus didn't beat up the sinners and call them heathen. He loved them where they were and spent time with them in their homes and had meals with them. I wanted to get them all saved RIGHT NOW and tell them they were doing everything wrong! That approach worked when I

was an evangelist. I'd go pump up a church, and they'd bring their friends. But when I started pastoring people and walking with them and seeing their lives falling apart, screaming at them did not make them love Jesus. Love and compassion and mercy and grace and the Holy Spirit bring people to Jesus. It was as if God said, "Herbert, you just preach truth, love people, and let the Holy Spirit do what only the Holy Spirit can do." That was my journey.

You played college football. Which is harder—being a football player or being a pastor? You take hits in both jobs.

I would definitely say pastoring is harder than football. I can handle the two-a-day practices and the physically grueling schedule and the hitting—that was hard. But for me, the emotional, spiritual, mental grind of ministry, leading a group and working with budgets and staffing, taking emotional shots from people, living with disappointment when someone you thought was on board goes back in the world or leaves the church. Those things are more difficult for me than getting my head knocked off on the football field.

Having a trusted church member drop out or have a moral failure is different from having a lineman miss a block.

It is. I can hurt for a day or two after a hard tackle, but I can hurt for six months over something with someone in our church.

HOW TO LINK: Connect with Herbert at [People's Church](#); his blog, [HerbertCooper.com](#), on [Facebook](#); or on Twitter, [@HerbertCooper](#).