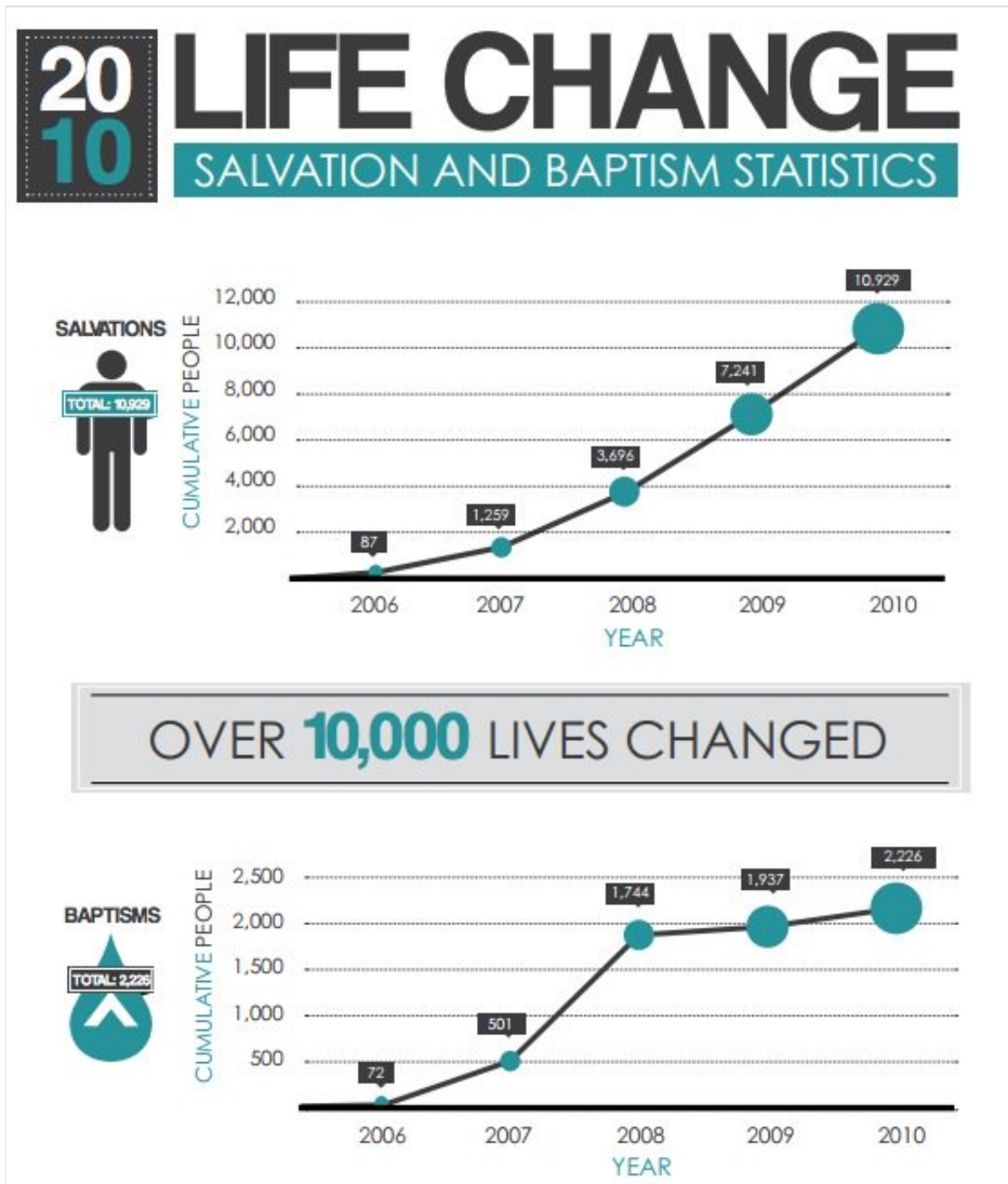


How Steven Furtick engineered a spontaneous miracle

While we're on the topic of Steven Furtick's marvelous manipulated numbers, now is as good a time as any to look back on his 2011 spontaneous baptism event where he carefully manipulated his congregation to herd them through his baptism factory.

For a bit of background, Elevation had experienced a couple of lean years for baptisms, which may be why Furtick needed something big to move the numbers. Here's how [Elevation reported](#) its 2010 salvations and baptisms.



Elevation's salvations and baptisms for 2010

The real story of the numbers is hidden by the tricky way the data is presented cumulatively, which means that the line will never go down. The numbers claimed in 2010 include all the baptisms and salvations from 2006 through 2009 as well. If you look at the actual numbers for each year, you see something very different.

Elevation Salvation & Baptism Statistics

Year	Salvations	Baptisms	Percentage Baptized
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2008	2,437	1,243	51
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2009	3,545	193	5
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2010	3,688	289	8
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2011	7,699	2,158	28
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2012	6,097	Not reported ?	
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The spike in baptisms in 2008 came from Elevation's first "spontaneous" event, when they baptized 1,044 over two weeks. Outside of those two weeks, they baptized another 199, which is a similar rate to the two years after it. So, even though this Baptist church was adding thousands of salvations, it was unable to get more than a relative handful to follow up with baptism. Either Furtick wasn't preaching baptism, or he was preaching it poorly, but if you're a Baptist preacher, you really ought to do better than have only 5 percent of your conversions be baptized. Baptism by full immersion is the most celebrated sacrament (though they call it an ordinance) of the denomination that helped start Furtick's church. As will be detailed below, Furtick and Elevation solved this problem by meticulously planning a baptism ambush when they would emotionally manipulate as many of the congregation as possible to be baptized immediately.

Before the criticism, some words of praise. Furtick rightly tells his congregation that they should not seek to be baptized if they have been baptized before as adults, even if it was in another church and even if they'd prefer a more meaningful experience now. His pal, Perry Noble, doesn't restrict re-baptisms the same way.

Now, returning to regular programming, the problems with this event:

Emotional Manipulation

In the moments before his call to action, Furtick tells his audience (at 50:20 in this Elevation video),

You know God is calling you, and if you feel that in your heart, let me assure you that is the Holy Spirit of God calling you. It is not emotional manipulation. It's the presence of God drawing you and calling you. So in just a moment, I'm going to count to three. When I say "three," at every campus I want you to move into the aisles and go to the exit where the ushers are stationed at your campus.

No manipulation, all God. Let's check that.

As part of the [promotional package](#) for *Sun Stand Still*, Elevation offered what it calls a *Spontaneous Baptism How-To Guide* ([Word doc](#)), which is long on manipulation, and short on the Holy Spirit.

On the [Sun Stand Still website](#), it describes the event in miraculous terms:

Sun Stand Still is about believing God for the impossible. At Elevation Church in the summer of 2011, we saw God move in one of the most amazing ways in the history of our church...

We baptized 2,158 people over 2 weekends. It was unbelievable. It required audacious faith in a God who provides.

The preface to the guide also frames the event as a *Sun Stand Still* miracle.

As a church we pray Sun Stand Still prayers all the time. We are constantly asking God to do something that seems impossible and then believing that he is going to pull through.

Most recently we prayed and asked God to lead thousands of people to take a public stand in their faith in Christ through baptism. God blew our minds and in two weekends we saw 2158 respond and be baptized.

Except that it didn't blow their minds at all, and the results underperformed what they expected would be possible. We know this because they explain how they ran the numbers from the 2008 event which showed that 16 percent of attenders responded to

the invitation to be baptized. They say they expected the same number the second time, and even used the 2008 numbers to estimate the proportion of females to males (60/40), from which they calculated exactly what size clothing they needed to have on hand for people entering the pool. From the guide:

You will want to calculate the number of each item to be purchased based on your projection of how many people will be baptized, the number of men vs. women, and the breakdown of sizes.

The 2011 event, even with the knowledge gained from the first run, only yielded a 13 percent response, down almost 20 percent from the first time. Elevation almost certainly over-prepared and had hundreds of clothing items they never needed to use. They would have been prepared to baptize at least 1,600 in the first week, but baptized only 1,428. Now, preparation is not necessarily emotional manipulation, though it does suggest that they were relying on the power of raw numbers as much as they were on the feeling in the heart that Furtick assured them was from God. How this blew their minds, I really don't know. Since 2008, Elevation reported that they saw 14,932 new conversions, of which only 2,640 were baptized, either spontaneously or deliberately. That's a three-year salvation-to-baptism conversion rate of 18 percent.

Rather than advertising this as a model for [other churches to follow](#), this is a model that should embarrass them and prompt serious change. Perhaps the vast majority of those 15,000 reported salvations, weren't. What happened to the 12,000 people who "made a decision" at Elevation yet didn't get baptized? For a Baptist pastor who cared for his flock, *that* ought to be mind blowing.

For the few that Elevation did baptize, their how-to guide documents exactly how they used emotional manipulation to get people from their seats to the pool. Volunteers were placed throughout the campuses to make sure the baptism candidates maintained the emotional fervor that Furtick had created in the service. Here are some of the instructions from the guide:

[At the doors] Smile and clap showing people you are excited they came forward.

[For the 30-60 volunteers lining the hallway] Create an atmosphere of

Celebration for those being baptized as they walk toward the changing rooms... this needs to be HUGE and over the top celebration!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

[For the teams escorting people to the pools] Start in the hallway smiling, clapping and creating an atmosphere of excitement and help direct people to the changing rooms.

Have them take out their phones and tweet #follow that they are being baptized today!! ...We created a hash tag on Twitter and tweeted individual stories. We had a crawl on our iMag screens of live twitter feed to build excitement during the Worship Experiences.

Perhaps you could classify this as encouragement for a decision already made, not manipulation. You could, though if this were a decision made with confidence and determination, there would be no need to constantly reinforce that decision. Why I classify these as manipulative comes from the very first action, performed just seconds after Furtick's assurance that he wasn't manipulating them. As you saw above, Furtick prepares them for action, then counts down from three (that should be the clue, right there). Look at what happens when he gets to zero:

15 people will sit in the worship experience and be the first ones to move when Pastor gives the call.

1. Sit in the auditorium and begin moving forward when Pastor Steven says go.
2. Move intentionally through the highest visibility areas and the longest walk.

Elevation has seeded its four auditoriums with 60 shills who pretend to be responding to the call. Their high-visibility movement is designed to manipulate others to follow. If Furtick was confident in his message and in the efficacy of the Holy Spirit's call, he shouldn't need fake converts.

This is even more interesting for Furtick's restriction on re-baptisms. We know these 60 are official volunteers, so it's almost certain all had already been baptized. That means that if they melted away out of the lines later on, their response in the auditorium was a lie. For good doctrinal reasons that even Steven Furtick understands, they never ought

to have responded in the first place. Not only are they lying, they are pretending to sinfully partake in the most important sacrament of their church. That's serious stuff for a pastor and church to be encouraging.

(It's *possible* these were people who needed to be baptized, though there's nothing in the document that indicates how the church would find the 360 people that would have been needed to cover its four campuses meeting a total of 24 times over the two weeks. He would need to have recruited twice as many people as Elevation baptizes in a whole year, and have each one agree to participate in the trick and keep quiet about it. It didn't happen.)

Perhaps Furtick realized that his own preaching wasn't enough. Look at Elevation's numbers again. Without a mass event, Furtick couldn't convince more than about 200 in any year to be baptized, so he needed to add manipulation to his message. In his book, *Influence*, Robert Cialdini describes a persuasive method called Social Proof, the idea that "the greater the number of people who find any idea correct, the more the idea will be correct." The reason the 60 volunteers were asked to stand was to assure the people sitting behind them that instantly responding to the Furtick Countdown was right. Cialdini gives a few examples of this, but in one he describes the persuasive genius of Jim Jones.

Although he was without question a man of rare dynamism, the power he wielded strikes me as coming less from his remarkable personal style than from his understanding of fundamental psychological principles. His real genius as a leader was his realization of the limitations of individual leadership. No leader can hope to persuade, regularly and single-handedly, all the members of the group. A forceful leader can reasonably expect, however, to persuade some sizable proportion of group members. Then the raw information that a substantial number of group members has been convinced can, by itself, convince the rest. Thus the most influential leaders are those who know how to arrange group conditions to allow the principle of social proof to work maximally in their favor. (p. 156)

Furtick isn't Jones, but their persuasive techniques are identical.

Favoritism

Although Elevation didn't and couldn't know who would answer the call, it did have means of filtering people according to specific desirable characteristics once they were on the move. They mainly wanted young people with compelling stories.

Besides the 15 skills, you'd imagine that the first people to reach the changing areas were the ones who most wanted to be baptized. Never mind letting them go first, however, as Elevation preferred young people. From the guide:

The first people going into the changing rooms have got to be people who move quickly, they must be changed and out in stage in a few minutes. Pick young energetic people, not necessarily those who are there first.

(I am not quite sure what the "out in stage" means here. I seems they may have had a tank set up on the stage where they wanted this first group to go, and then the older, slower Elevators could be baptized in relative privacy outside.)

Most of the participants were expected to remain essentially anonymous, treated with not much more attention than a tire change.

Think of the [changing] room in terms of a NASCAR pit stop, it has to be a quick in and quick out.

Two attendants were assigned to marshall groups of 12-14 people, and one of their first tasks was to ask the group to share their names in order to write it on a specially formatted name tag.

As the group is sharing names, the host prints the name tags that are Legible and places the name tag on the outside shoulder. Depending upon the tank it could be right or left, but the shoulder that is away from the baptizer so the tag is not obstructed during photos. Write the name in two lines and leave room for a tracking number to be written in the upper RIGHT corner of the name tag.

Not everybody got reduced to a number, though. If you had a good story, the church wanted to know much more than your name. The marshals were to be on the lookout for

video-worthy biographies.

You are looking for 1 or 2 great stories in your group. When you ID those individuals, place a “black wrist band” on them so that the video crew can interview them after they are baptized. After they are baptized help ensure they go to the video recording area.

The pair of hosts were also assisted by media team members who were also hunting for good stories.

[We need] (2) people working with hosts and circulating amongst the team mining great stories and pushing them up to the video crew.

At NewSpring, where Furtick’s friend Perry Noble pastors, they have a motto that says, “Every number has a name, every name as a story, and every story matters to God.” At Elevation, every name has a number, some names have a story, and one or two stories matter to Pastor Steven.

So What?

This is all being done for a good cause, so why does this matter, anyway?

More Fakery About Numbers

Elevation Church says it’s all about the numbers, but only when they want to be. Some numbers, like the pastor’s salary and book-deal information, they won’t reveal. Other numbers, like annual baptisms, they hide behind charts designed to paper over the almost complete inability of their pastor to persuade people to be baptized without special events. If anything, the chasm between reported salvations and baptisms tell us that something is terribly wrong. Either the salvations aren’t actually there, or the church is full of unbaptized, disobedient believers. The numbers, while large, are terrible.

Low Confidence in the Message

I don’t know what Pastor Furtick was preaching about baptism in 2009 and 2010, but it either didn’t exist or it was spectacularly unpersuasive. Elevation Church is Baptist, so

you'd expect that they would carefully preach and teach that doctrine to each new believer. If baptism was so essential in 2011, why did they let the thousands of new believers since 2008 walk in spiritual disobedience and partial blessing? You'd hope a Baptist pastor would care about that.

Low Reverence for the Doctrine

If you had a couple of friends who, while dating, told you that weddings were a special, sacred event, and then you learned that they flew to Vegas one weekend and got hitched in a drive-through chapel, you'd reconsider whether they actually believed weddings to be important at all. I don't know what other Baptist churches think of Furtick's (Noble, too, for that matter) 30-45 second walk-through number-on-your-chest baptisms, but I'd cringe at how the central sacrament of the denomination was being mistreated.

Little Respect for the People

One of Baptists' criticisms of infant baptism is that the rite is meaningless to the recipient, which is why they distinguish it as *believer's baptism*; you need to believe before you're baptized. Baptists also emphasize the volitional aspect of the sacrament, so that the participants' attitude is one of informed obedience in an exercise of a free will. Although Noble allows do-overs, Furtick does not, so his flock only get one chance at a moment that will change their lives. Why not teach the people well and let them think about it and own their decision? How many people will look back at that special moment and regret that they were merely a pit-stop project for a pastor who needed to boost his baptism balance sheet?