

ST. BARTHOLOMEW'S ANGLICAN CHURCH IN THE TOWN OF TONAWANDA, NY
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“ENGAGING THE CULTURE WITH THE GOSPEL” (part 4)

BUILDING BRIDGES TO THE GOSPEL

I. Review of Study #3

- A. What stuck out to us last week?**
- B. What are the three essential aspects to effective evangelism?**
- C. What are the three skills we learned last week for building gospel centered relationships?**

II. Building Bridges to the Gospel

Recall from our previous studies, if we want to be effective in today's culture, our evangelism needs to be *relational, experiential, and intellectual*. Last week we talked about relational evangelism - how to build gospel centered relationships through *intentional connections, showing hospitality, and in engaging in thoughtful dialogue*.

Tonight, we continue our focus on *relational aspects* of evangelism and specifically on how to share the gospel in a way that can be understood and connects with the person to whom we are speaking. One challenge we face is that we struggle to help the other person understand why the gospel matters at all.

But to this end, we can effectively use our relational skills to impact our relationships with the non-Christians in our lives for Christ. Of course, if a friend just doesn't seem interested at all about Jesus dying for their sins 2000 years ago, even if the relationship is strong, it can seem like we are talking past each other. They may not understand why anyone had to die for their sins. They may think they are a good person. As a result, we may wonder why they can't see and understand how important Jesus is for living. We become stuck and we will stay stuck, *unless we can learn to build bridges to the gospel*.

A. The Example of the Apostle Paul in Acts

One of the things that Paul did very well as seen in the book of Acts is that he learned how to contextualize the gospel for his audience. Even though the content of his gospel message is exactly the same, the way he communicates is different based on the understanding and cultural assumptions of his audience.

There are several examples of this in Acts but we will compare just two of them. In **Acts 13:13-43** Paul speaks to an audience of people who already believe the Old Testament. He shares the gospel with them at the weekly Saturday synagogue meeting. He talks about the history of Israel, about Abraham, Moses and the Exodus. He talks about how the people asked for a king and how David was set up as God's king over his people.

Then he says in **v22-23**: ***“And when he had removed him, he raised up David to be their king, of whom he testified and said, ‘I have found in David the son of Jesse a man after my heart, who will***

do all my will.’ 23 Of this man’s offspring God has brought to Israel a Savior, Jesus, as he promised.”

So, he first shows that Jesus is the prophesied messianic son of David and then he goes on quoting many Psalms and other passages showing how the Messiah was prophesied to suffer and rise from the dead.

He tells them all sorts of true and beautiful things, but he is primarily reasoning from the Scriptures that *they already believed to be true.*

However, Paul’s message sounds very different in **Acts 17:16-34**. Paul is in Athens. He starts by reasoning with people in the marketplace, until he is invited to speak at the Areopagus. Here he speaks to sophisticated pagan philosophers who have largely abandoned belief in a literal pantheon of gods and instead follow a variety of philosophical schools. It is a longer passage, but I think it is worth reading to see how differently Paul reasons with the Athenian philosophers. Notice how the gospel message is the same. But the points are made very differently, so that they can better connect with Paul’s audience

Acts 17:22-32: “So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: “Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. 23 For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription: ‘To the unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. 24 The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, 25 nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. 26 And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, 27 that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, 28 for “‘In him we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your own poets have said, “‘For we are indeed his offspring.’

29 Being then God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man. 30 The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, 31 because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.” 32 Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked. But others said, “We will hear you again about this.”

Paul does several interesting things here. *First, he does not reason directly from the Bible.* There are certainly times and places that we need to reason from the Bible but in this instance, Paul assumes his hearers have ZERO knowledge of the Bible and so saying things like “Jesus is the prophesied son of David” would literally be meaningless to his Greek/Gentile audience. Instead, Paul connects with their cultural assumptions and uses those assumptions to show how their cultural assumptions fall short. He then points them to the gospel.

Second, Paul builds a bridge using their cultural understanding of God. He actually quotes their famous philosophers and agrees with them. He points out the things they get right. Paul is NOT AT ALL saying that he agrees with Stoic or Epicurean philosophy, but he points out and publicly *agrees with the things that they get right in order to build a bridge with his audience*

Third, by having made a connection to their cultural understanding of God, Paul then brings in the gospel. He is not content simply with agreeing with them. *He starts with what they get right.* He builds a bridge first. But then he points out the things they get very wrong and how the gospel gets it right. And he is not shy about proclaiming how God is calling people to repent and put their faith in Jesus for salvation.

B. Building Bridges Today

So, what does that mean for us today? How can we apply the wisdom of Paul to our own situations? When it comes to sharing the gospel with others, we need to know: the content of our message remains the same but the way we communicate is different *depending on who our audience is*.

Tim Keller, in his book *Center Church* helpfully illustrates what Paul does and how we can imitate him. He shows that every Culture has “what could be called A” beliefs and “B” beliefs. “A” beliefs are beliefs in a certain cultural worldview that align with the Bible in some way. When people hold “A” beliefs it makes them predisposed to believe that aspect of what the Bible teaches. “B” beliefs are Christian beliefs that a cultural worldview actively disagrees with. They make certain aspects of Christianity implausible. And these are not the same in every culture. That is why Paul’s message changes depending on his audience.

So, for example, the “A” beliefs for the Jews were radically different from “A” beliefs for the Greeks in Athens. Perhaps a helpful way to visualize it is imagining a river, and through conversation we want to float all the core ideas of Christianity across the river to the other person. In other words, “A” beliefs float but “B” beliefs sink!

Thus, if we want to be successful we cannot start with the “B” ideas. We still need to get them across the river. But if we start with “B” ideas they sink and we get nowhere. Instead, we should begin with the “A” beliefs and then in our conversation we float the “B” beliefs on top of the “A” beliefs.

Let me give one example of how I do this fairly often. One of the “A” beliefs of our culture is justice. People care a lot about fairness and justice. One of the “B” beliefs of our culture is God’s judgment against sin. But we can easily float the idea of God’s judgment on top of the belief that justice is important.

1. **Affirm:** God cares about justice
2. **Ask:** is it okay for God to let people get away with evil? Or should he bring justice to them?
3. **Clarify:** That is what God’s wrath against sin is. God is perfectly just and he does not allow anyone to get away with evil.

This is a really hard skill that takes time and experience and trial and error. We need to know what the essential beliefs of Christianity are AND we need to understand the cultural worldview and beliefs and how they differ.

What are some examples of “A” beliefs in our broader culture?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

What are some examples of “B” beliefs in our broader culture?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

III. The Multifaceted Reality of the Gospel

In order to communicate the gospel clearly to unbelievers we need to grow in the skill of sharing the multifaceted reality of the gospel. We normally think of just one aspect of the gospel as evangelicals. We talk primarily about Jesus dying to pay for our sins so that we can have eternal life.

While this is absolutely true, it does not easily connect with our culture today. This is why we need to grow in our ability to share the gospel with others. While Jesus certainly did die to pay for the guilt of human sin, Jesus' ministry and work addresses many other realities in life. Here are *five examples* that may prove compelling for different people.

- A. The Language of the Battlefield** - the world is filled with and controlled by evil influence. Through his ministry and on the cross Jesus went to war with Satan and the powers of evil and on the cross he ultimately defeated the powers of evil for us.
- B. The Language of the Marketplace** - we were enslaved to evil. We had no freedom and no ability to set ourselves free but Jesus came into the marketplace and bought us with the price of his own blood. As a result, we are no longer enslaved to Satan
- C. The Language of Exile** - we live in a reality of relational brokenness. We desire to belong and often feel like we do not belong. This is due to a broken world and the self-centeredness of others and ourselves. As a result we are exiled from God and we deserve to be banished and not belong. But Jesus went out and suffered exile in our place. But now through Jesus we are brought out of exile and into community and belonging
- D. The Language of the Temple** - we have a sense that things in the world are not quite right. They are broken and their beauty is imperfect. We have a sense of being unclean and broken. Jesus makes us clean and he makes us beautiful so that we can enter into the presence of God.
- E. The Language of the Court of Law** - we are guilty of wrongdoing and stand accused. The price to pay for our crimes is our life but Jesus takes the punishment we deserve. And by his blood payment has been made. Jesus removes our guilt and makes us righteous

Each of these five aspects highlights ways that the Bible talks about what Jesus has accomplished. And with every person we talk with, some may find some aspects of what Jesus has accomplished to be boring while others will find aspects to be compelling. *Our role is to be well versed in the fullness of what Jesus has accomplished for us*

IV. Gospel Metaphors

Now how do we tie this all together in our way of communicating the gospel with the real people that we know in our lives? We must forgo a one size fits all approach to sharing the message of the gospel. To do so means understanding that each person has a different existential experience of what they need.

Different people are prone to feel different needs in their lives. Some people experience deep loneliness or feeling left out. Others experience failure and the inability to be good enough to matter. Others experience guilt over things they have done in the past. Still others feel like their life lacks meaning, purpose, and direction. The truth is people have many different needs and every person experiences a number of different needs to varying degrees at any point in their life. In fact, we all experience ALL of these needs to at one point or another. But we are not always aware how often that may be the case with those around us.

Unfortunately, we waste a lot of time in evangelism trying to get someone else to feel the need that we want them to feel. It may be the need that we most experienced in coming to Jesus. So, we try again and again to convince them that they have the same need. In addition, one need that sometimes is overemphasized to the detriment of others is the one dealing with Jesus dying in our place to pay for our guilt from sin. This truth is central to the gospel message, but it is not the only one.

Instead, we need to remember the *multifaceted reality* of the gospel. We need to learn to use *the right gospel metaphor to speak to the need the person we are talking to is experiencing*. Here are FOUR gospel metaphors we can use to communicate what Jesus has done for us and how he meets a particular need each person has

- A. Guilt and shame** - while this is not common today, many people still may feel a sense of guilt over past wrongdoing in their lives. They feel like they cannot forgive themselves or that others can't forgive them for what they have done. They are burdened by their inner conscience. In this metaphor we can explain to them that Jesus came and died to pay for their guilt and shame in their place.
- B. Belonging** - many people experience a feeling of not being good enough. They feel like a failure. They have low self-worth. Even if a person accomplishes many things, no human accomplishment makes them feel fully satisfied. But in this gospel metaphor we recognize that in the gospel, God offers to adopt us and makes us his children. Through Jesus we can be adopted, out of the family of Satan in which we are always a failure, and into the family of God. Through Jesus we belong to God forever and we do not have to earn our place to be in His family.
- C. Purpose** - many people have a sense that their spiritual nature is broken. They feel spiritually disconnected and incomplete. Consequently, they feel like they have no purpose or meaning in life. But in this gospel metaphor we can share that Jesus has come to make us a new creation. Our old self of no purpose can be done away with in Jesus. God renews us spiritually, he gives us a new life, and with that new life he gives us purpose and an abundant life full of meaning. Our purpose of knowing and glorifying God will leave us ultimately satisfied.
- D. Intimacy** - we all long for intimate relationships. We crave relationships where we can be confident that we are loved and that we won't be abandoned. We want to know another person and to be known by them. We want to know we are loved. But the problem we face is that no human relationship can fully satisfy us. Sooner or later, they will leave us empty or that relationship will end in some way, either by conflict, abandonment, or death. But in this gospel metaphor we come to realize that Jesus desires to have a relationship with us. He offers us eternal union with the One true God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And in this relationship, we can know that He fully knows us and wants us to fully know Him! Through Jesus, God the Son, we have perfect love and satisfaction.

These are not the only metaphors to use, but they are the common ones that the Bible very clearly presents. It's why we should be prepared to use these gospel metaphors to share the gospel depending on the needs of those around us. Through these gospel metaphors we can point out how Jesus offers them healing and satisfaction in what they are experiencing.

V. Workshop: practice sharing the gospel using metaphor

What we are going to do now is workshop together and practice using different metaphors to build bridges to the gospel. What we will do is get into groups of about 4 people. And we will all get a case study scenario to read and work with.

In the scenario we are a father trying to share the gospel with his daughter, Megan. There is not tons of information about Megan. You may supplement with some other details as a group if that is helpful to you. But you can also think carefully about what information IS given about her.

What matters to her? What motivates her? What "A" doctrines does she affirm that might be good starting points? What "B" doctrines are challenging for her? So as a group answer questions 2 and 3 on the bottom.