

## How Should We Share the Gospel with Students?

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- ❖ A whole new world.
  - Our culture has undergone massive changes in recent times and will certainly continue to change at an even more accelerated pace. These changes deeply affect how we think about the most basic and important aspects of our lives.
  - Previous generations enjoyed more stability in their cultural outlook and developed an expectation that their way of looking at reality was fundamentally correct and perhaps even permanent. These previous generations built our great institutions, including the modern church.
  - Many churches are just now coming to grips with the fact that they must understand the world as it is now rather than as it was in recent history. So much has been written on this vital topic, it is not possible to fairly represent even the most essential ideas here. However, we will attempt to highlight several key points (in no particular order) of the current discussion that will help us be more effective in sharing the gospel today.
- ❖ Understanding salvation primarily as an event.
  - This way of understanding of salvation originates with 19<sup>th</sup> century revival preaching. The evangelist could presume a basic understanding of the gospel and his or her job was to secure a “decision” or a “commitment” from as many people as possible in the course of a revival service.
  - The closest parallel of this style of evangelism to biblical times would be Jesus and the disciples preaching to the Jews. The Jews already had a pre-evangelistic preparation in the form of the Law and the Prophets (the Old Testament). They were prepared to hear the Good News about the Messiah (Christ) and many responded on their first hearing.
  - However, our situation today in the UK is very different than this scenario. Today we cannot assume that people have even a basic understanding of the Bible. In fact, they are more likely to be convinced that the Bible and especially the church are highly suspect. In this way, our culture is more like the Greeks (non-Jews) that Paul preached to in the Book of Acts.
  - Also, the event-orientation of some evangelism methods has another problem. Jesus’ instructions are very clear: we are to go into the entire world and make disciples of all nations. When salvation is understood primarily as an event, the church often sees a person’s public commitment as an arrival at a destination instead of the continuation of a journey of becoming a disciple of Jesus.
- ❖ Understanding salvation primarily as a process.
  - Even when someone responds to a “salvation call” in a church service by coming forward or raising their hand (in the 19<sup>th</sup> century revivals, the person was to come forward and shake the preacher’s hand) as a sign of

commitment to Christ, it always means something that is unique and sometimes other than what the preacher intended. However, it almost always means something like: "I want to take the next step."

- "Taking the next step" is usually a good way for Christians to understand the process of evangelism. The believer can serve as a kind of "midwife" to the next step toward their friend becoming a new creation in Christ.
  - When we understand salvation primarily as a process we must be aware that there are often key "events" that mark milestones in a person's spiritual journey. For example, when someone prays to surrender himself or herself to Jesus for the first time, or takes communion at church for the first time, or is baptised...these are all significant events that should be celebrated but not viewed as a kind of "arrival".
  - Sometimes Christians view discipleship as a process that begins after salvation. But if we view the process of becoming a disciple of Jesus as beginning long before the "public commitment" it is more helpful for the believing friend to know how to be helpful to a fellow traveller on the spiritual journey toward maturity in Christ.
- ❖ Belonging before believing.
- It has been said that the church is both the greatest witness for Christ but also the greatest witness against him. The atmosphere of the church, when it is full of the grace and power of the Holy Spirit is perhaps the most powerful evidence of the truth of the gospel.
  - In previous generations, we did not expect that non-Christians would desire to become actively involved in a church until after they were "saved". Often today, attending and sometimes even serving in the local church is an important part of a "seeker's" spiritual journey. For many non-Christians who are seeking faith, it is the most reasonable way to test the authenticity of the Christian life. This is another reason it is vital to understand discipleship prior to "salvation" as a legitimate part of the evangelistic process.
- ❖ The Engle's Scale.
- The Engle's Scale was one of the first teaching tools that helped churches understand the process nature of evangelism. The scale points start long before the "0" mark indicating the seeker's initial decision to surrender their lives to Christ.
  - Keep in mind that this is only a model, which means it is only one way of looking at this complex and mysterious process. But as a model it can help us help our friends take the next step of the spiritual journey.
  - This model helps us understand that we find non-Christian friends at varying stages along the spiritual journey. It also illustrates that the journey is usually cumulative, one experience leads to the next in a way that makes sense to the person. While the Holy Spirit can greatly accelerate the process for some, most people move along at a fairly leisurely pace that can take years.

- The role of the spiritual friend is to accurately understand where the person is currently in the spiritual journey and assist them through prayer, service, and discussion, to take the next step.
- ❖ More stories, less propositions.
  - Previous generations sometimes appreciated hearing their truth boiled down to abstractions or propositions. They enjoyed hearing “Five Reasons Christ Came to Earth” or “Six Principles for a Successful Prayer Life” or even, “The Four Spiritual Laws”.
  - Many people today do not find this way of understanding complex spiritual issues meaningful or authentic. We tend to experience life as stories. When others ask us to tell a bit about ourselves we usually don’t recite a list of characteristics: male, overweight, musician, beard, size 9 shoe... Instead, we tell our story: “I grew up in \_\_\_\_ and my dad worked at a \_\_\_\_\_.” This is also why we love movies and even soap operas: we can’t resist a good story.
  - It’s interesting that Jesus rarely expressed his teaching in propositions. Jesus primarily told stories or painted mental pictures called parables.
  - Rather than explaining Jesus as a list or even describing a set of ideas about Jesus, perhaps we would be better off telling one of Jesus’ stories or even telling the story of Jesus.
- ❖ More conversations and questions, less preaching.
  - Have you noticed that when Jesus was asked a question he responded with another question? Surely it was not because he didn’t know the answer! Often people get the wrong spiritual answers because they are asking the wrong questions. Jesus’ questions made people think about their spiritual lives at a deeper level.
  - When a non-Christian asks us a spiritual question, the temptation to tell everything we know can be almost overwhelming. If the shoe were on the other foot, we would probably think our talkative friend was a real bore. It must be some kind of sin to take the most amazing story in history and bore people with it.
  - A conversation is like a friendly game of tennis: you hit something over the net and wait to see what gets hit back. Even better, Brian MacLaren points out that a genuine spiritual conversation is like a dance. We respond to the other person in the context of a rhythm of give and take.
- ❖ More prayer and presence, less talking.
  - We need to recognize that God is at work in our friend long before and long after our conversations with them.
  - We should offer prayer and to really pray for our friend and really expect that God will do something in his or her life to help them take the next step.
  - Evangelism is more like farming than building. In farming you can only create the best situation for the seed you can, and then you must trust the seed (the gospel) to do what it was made to do.