

## Sharing our faith

“...Shine like stars in the universe as you hold out the word of life...” Philippians 2:15-16

Barry Cooper uses these verses as his strap line on the DVD about sharing our faith as part of the Discipleship explored course that he wrote and presents. He then asks the question “Which do you think is most important, to tell people the gospel or to live a godly life among them?”

He goes on to illustrate the point by relating how his friend, Robert, who had been working in an engineering firm for five years, was moving to a new job. At his leaving party one of his colleagues stood up and said “We all agreed that you are the most likeable guy we have ever worked with, such integrity and patience.” Then he said something that made Rob, as a Christian, feel that he had missed a five year long opportunity. “We tried to work out what it was that makes you so special – we decided you must be a Buddhist.”

He also recalls someone he knew, who spoke freely about his Christian faith but spoiled his witness by cheating on his expenses like everyone else in the office. His conclusion to his own question is that both are vital if we are to share our faith effectively.

So we want to look at both how do we shine like stars in the universe and how do we hold out the word of life to those who are lost? Add to that how do we do that in the second half of life? Are there more obstacles to sharing our faith? Is it really our responsibility at this time of life? What contexts and opportunities do we have where we are now? We may look back on the halcyon days when, with great enthusiasm we went out in groups, knocking on doors, inviting fellow students to mission meetings or using a questionnaire in order to get an opportunity to share the gospel. How long is it since you last shared your faith with an unbeliever? Perhaps the thought fills you with dread and there may be many reasons why:-

- We may see evangelism as the role of the professionals e.g. the pastor, the missionary, those with a ‘gift’ for evangelism
- We may feel that we don’t know the gospel well enough to share it confidently with someone else.
- We think that we may be asked difficult questions that we are unable to answer.
- We don’t want to offend people or to invade their personal space and, if we do it badly, we might put them off becoming a Christian.
- We may feel a sense of shame that holds us back because we know that we are not a ‘good enough’ Christian or perhaps we are really not sure if it is true anyway.
- We may judge that people will not listen to us, that they are too far away from God and that they won’t change.
- Perhaps the primary reason that we don’t share our faith, especially with close family, friends and work colleagues, is fear. Fear of ridicule, fear of rejection, fear of what they will think of us, especially because we have to go on living or working alongside them in the future.

## Motivations

How can we move forward from feeling intimidated, defensive or inadequate to share our faith and gain both the sense of urgency and motivation that we need where we are now? As ever we need to look to the scriptures at God's heart and His purposes and at the power of the gospel in saving the lost:-

*God's love for the world* – His initiative in sending His son that we might be saved and have a relationship with Him eternally. (John 3:16, Ephesians 2:4-5, Romans 5:8). His compassion for the lost as He sees the harassed and helpless and their need for a Shepherd (Matthew 9:36). His patient desire that none should perish but that all should come to repentance (2 Peter 3:9).

*Concern for God's glory* – that people would turn away from idols and come to worship the living God and acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord (1 Thessalonians 2:9,10, Philippians 2:10,11)

*The lostness of those without Christ* – reminding ourselves of the seriousness of judgement, which can grow dim living in a world that has no time for God (Hebrews 9:27, John 3:36). The consequences of continued rebellion against God are serious and people need to be aware as we share the good news with them.

*The Gospel* – “the power of God for salvation for everyone who believes” (Romans 1:16). The Gospel is true, powerful and good news for those who accept it (1 Thessalonians 1:4-5, Colossians 1:5-6). We need to grow in the deep conviction that the gospel is true and the only answer to those we share it with. To be convinced that the Holy Spirit will apply the truth of the gospel to the human heart and transform that person's life and eternal destiny.

*The love of Christ compels us* – God has shone the light of the gospel in our hearts; He has poured out His love, mercy, grace and forgiveness on us; we daily receive all the benefits of our relationship with Him and our hope of heaven, how can we deny others the opportunity to know Christ?

*The call to be part of God's mission* - The call to be Christ's witnesses where we are (Acts 1:8). As Christ's disciples he commissioned us and sent us, as He was sent by the Father (John 20:21). Christ's last command to his disciples on earth was to “Go and make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19). We may be over familiar with these verses and feel that they are really for those working cross culturally or at least in full time Christian work and maybe for some that is the case, but a short time before Jesus had told these same disciples that their witness should start in Jerusalem, exactly where they were and where they were frightened for their lives. We too are called not to *do* witnessing but to *be* His witness just where He has put us.

“Jesus made it clear that every disciple is called both to be a witness to Jesus and to be committed to the task of evangelism. ‘As the Father has sent me, even so I send you.....You shall be my witnesses...to the ends of the earth.’ If Christ's first call to us is ‘Come’, his second is ‘Go’ – ‘Go your way’...‘Go and preach the gospel’...‘Go and make disciples...’” (Watson p171)

*We are ambassadors for the king* – “We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making His appeal through us.”(2 Corinthians 5:19-20) God has entrusted to us the message of reconciliation and has given us the role of representing Him to those we meet so that they might hear the message and be reconciled to God. This is an amazing and huge responsibility because it involves both our life and our words. This message must be spoken in a way that people understand and have the opportunity to respond (Romans 10:13-14).

“Have you ever really considered – that you are Jesus Christ to the people you know? You and I are his instruments standing in the place of the Lord Jesus Christ, beseeching others to be reconciled to God. To me that is a grabber. And as we go to work, walk down the street, talk to our room-mates, visit our next door neighbours, we are face to face in conversation with people for whom Christ died.” (Little p40)

### **Whose responsibility is it?**

We may feel overwhelmed and burdened by the task of reaching others for Christ. We need to consider and clarify what is our role and what is God’s role in someone coming to Christ? Some verses that speak to this are in 2 Corinthians 4:1-7:-

*God’s Role* – v3 tells us that the gospel is veiled to those who are perishing and v4 tells us that the god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers. This means that both the eyes and the minds of unbelievers are blind to the truth of the gospel, to who Christ is, why he came and what the gospel offers those who turn to him. Even some people who know the facts of the gospel intellectually may not perceive the truth and its implications in their hearts so that they are unable to put their trust in Christ and own him as their Lord.

But v6 explains that it is God’s role to bring the light of the gospel to shine in the ‘darkness’ i.e. the lack of spiritual awareness and understanding. God’s Holy Spirit brings conviction of sin. He gives the understanding and faith to believe who Christ is, why he came and the salvation offered to them because of Christ’s death and resurrection. He also gives the grace to turn to God in repentance and faith and opens the person’s heart to receive Christ. Acts 16:14-15 describes how God opened Lydia’s heart to receive the gospel after Paul had spoken to the women by the river praying.

*Our role* – First and foremost our role is to preach Jesus Christ as Lord v5. Fortunately this does not require a pulpit but means, like a herald, we are simply to tell people the message of the gospel. This verse goes on to say that we don’t seek to put forward ourselves but humbly seek to serve those we are endeavouring to reach and thus commend the gospel by our life. V7 also reminds us that in this task we are totally dependent on God both for our own salvation and for God to do the miracle of opening the person’s eyes and heart. “But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all surpassing power is from God and not from us.”

V2 Speaks to the attitude and motives of how we share the gospel. We are to set forth the truth plainly, in a way that the person can understand and is appropriate for them. We must never distort the gospel or add to its simplicity with our own traditions or preferences. The verse speaks about avoiding shameful and deceptive ways, which we may feel are

completely beyond us, but there is always the temptation to 'sugar coat' the gospel in some way to make it more acceptable or to fail to emphasise the need for repentance and the cost of discipleship. We must always share the gospel faithfully and with an integrity of life that commends it to the listeners.

God has given us the great privilege and joy of being involved with Him in seeing others come to new life in Christ, but we have this ministry by God's mercy and must approach it with humility and in dependence on His grace and the work of His Holy Spirit. Therefore prayer is paramount, since it keeps us dependant and reminds us that sharing our faith is an act of spiritual warfare as we seek to see people rescued from the dominion of darkness and brought into the kingdom of Christ. (Colossians 1:13)

"And pray for us too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains." (Colossians 4:3)

### **The Messenger**

#### *Living out the Gospel*

"So make sure the message you share is consistent with the message you bear.....watch over your life as well as your doctrine by living out the gospel." (Stiles p52)

We have already thought about the importance of the integrity of our life and conduct. This is emphasised in the life of the apostle Paul, who often used the example of his own life to give validity both to his calling and to the gospel message. Stiles reminds us that "We never grow beyond the gospel" and that it is essential in being an effective witness for Christ that we continue to deepen both our understanding and experience of the gospel in our own lives. Paul often used the phrase that he was not ashamed of the gospel. We may not feel ashamed of the gospel but we must never become over familiar with the gospel, reducing it to a formula or transaction and thus losing the immensity of all that God has done for us in Christ.

"When our lives are in line with the gospel and our witness to Christ is consistent, we find that our grace-filled lives have perfume-like attraction."(2 Corinthians 2:16) (Stiles p58)

#### *Boldness to speak*

"Boldness is not a lack of fear. It is faith in something bigger than our fears so that we appear fearless. Confidence in something bigger than our fears gives us the strength to do the right thing in spite of opposition or persecution." (Stiles p82)

The greatest hindrance to boldness is the fear of man, that the person might ridicule us or our beliefs or that they will reject us or think that we are weird. It may be that this is one of the obstacles to sharing the gospel that increases as we get older. Perhaps we feel that we have more to lose by way of status or reputation. Perhaps we have become comfortable in our family relationships and social group and don't want to ruffle anyone's feathers so we avoid the issue and hope that there will be a better opportunity one day. The truth is that if the fear of man replaces the fear of God then it has become more important to us than obeying God and the lostness of others, even those we say we love.

The apostle Paul also knew what it was to need boldness to speak and asked for prayer “Pray also for me, that whenever I open my mouth, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel for which I am an ambassador in Chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly as I should” (Ephesians 6:19-20)

### *Being Prepared*

How often have you left a conversation and thought that you had completely missed an opportunity to bring the gospel into the conversation or to share something of what Christ means to you? We were just not ready. It wasn't on our radar at the time. 1 Peter 3:15 says “But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.”

Being prepared and doing some homework will give us more confidence to take the opportunities that arise. Work on a simple but clear way to communicate the gospel to someone who is ready to hear it. Think through and research some of the questions most commonly asked by non-Christians. Prepare a simple testimony of how you came to Christ that you could share with someone who was interested. As an older person it might take some thought as to what to include without giving a life history!

In a pluralistic society it might be helpful to do some reading on the primary beliefs of the other main religions, so that you are able to dialogue openly and without defensiveness. It also enables us to realise that the language we use needs to be appropriate e.g. to talk about being ‘born again’ to a Hindu will probably be read as reincarnation – we all hear things through the filter of our own understanding.

At times we will need to explain why Christ and the Christian message are unique and the only way to God, which may not be very acceptable in our post-modern and diverse society. Remember though, that winning an argument rarely brings people to Christ, but demonstrating interest in them, what they think and then without judgement, loving them and accepting them as they are, as a non-Christian, just might.

### *Be content in making your contribution*

Becoming a Christian is a continuum. Although conversion may seem to be sudden and dramatic for some, God has been at work using many people, circumstances and events in their lives to bring them to that point. We may reap where others have sown for years or we may sow and feel that we have had no effect, only for someone else to reap in the future. It is enough that we have been privileged to have had a contribution in what God has done in their lives.

“I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow.” 1 Corinthians 3:6-7

### *Be incarnational*

“If incarnation is the most profound way that God engaged the world, then we, His people, must follow in His footsteps – we must become incarnation-*al*. If *missional* defines our

being sent into the world, then *incarnational* must define the way in which we engage the world.” (Hirsch p234)

Alan and Debra Hirsch in their book “Untamed” came up with “the six P’s” of engaging with the world incarnationally:-

1. The Practice of Presence – this has to do with identifying with the person or group we are seeking to reach for Christ. It will involve understanding their culture, their story, their values, their concerns and their take on issues. We may feel that this is the province of the cross-cultural missionary but it may be the only way that we can engage with those we meet in our own secular culture today.
2. The Practice of Proximity- “Jesus did not expect people to come to where he was, as we often do, but rather he went to them. He hung out in their social spaces, markets, synagogues and homes. In other words he came into direct proximity; he was near to them” (Hirsch p237). They suggest that too many Christians ‘hang out’ only with other Christians in the places where other Christians go. If we are to meet unbelievers we need to intentionally go to where they are. We may need to be creative to get close enough to develop relationships of meaning and trust in order to understand where people are and what their needs are.
3. The Practice of Powerlessness – In order to fully identify with us, Jesus came into our world, not as a fully grown man, but as a vulnerable, dependant baby. Philippians chapter two tells us that Jesus did not grasp at the position that was rightly his, but in humility became a servant. In order to come alongside others we need to be willing to put to death our pride and arrogance and to follow our Lord’s example of sacrificial service.
4. The Practice of Prevenience – This is the fact that God is always at work in the world in people’s lives and our own. John Wesley called this “prevenient grace” or God’s preparatory grace. We don’t ‘bring God’ with us into any situation – He’s there long before you or I arrive on the scene. This requires us to somehow discern the way God has been working in someone’s life and to join in with Him in His redemptive work.
5. The Practice of Passion – This reminds us of the passion or sufferings of Christ on the cross for us, to pay the price for our sin. “The fact is that humans suffer, and Christians who take seriously the lost and broken in our world will also suffer. This is the cost of discipleship; we are called to pick up our cross and follow Jesus (Matthew 16:24). (Hirsch p246). Questions about suffering both personally and existentially are never far away when we share the gospel and so we need to have thought through on some of the theological implications but more than that, to grow in our sense of empathy for those struggling with pain and suffering themselves. We need to be able to identify with others, not just with our minds but also with our hearts, and that is costly.
6. The Practice of Proclamation – Just as Jesus came to proclaim the good news of the Kingdom of God we are called to the same task. Part of our purpose in the world is to deliver the message of salvation and to legitimise what we say by how we live. “Following the logic of the incarnation itself, our message is heard properly only

when we have gone through the process of identifying with people, hearing them, understanding the issues they face, humbly living with them, and knowing how they experience and express their search for meaning. If we do this, we will have earned the right to address the hearts of the people and bring salvation to them.”  
(Hirsch p248)

### **Contextualisation**

In an essay called “Connecting without Compromise” the author wrote about contextualisation or the ability to go to people different from us and to be able to engage with them in such a way that we will be able to share Christ with them. They first define the meaning of context:-

“Context is everything that shapes the way people look at the world. It includes culture, religious and theological heritage, historical eras and trends, societal groupings (such as those based on education, economics, caste or other societal structures), age, gender and other personal circumstances. Everything that shapes the world view of each individual man and woman is part of context.”

Understanding the context of both the society and the individuals within that society with whom we seek to share the gospel is vital, if we are to share it appropriately and relevantly. The writer goes on to explain:-

“If we do not build bridges to the context where people actually live, we are likely to miscommunicate biblical truth. People need to hear the gospel so that they will understand it and want to accept it, and that demands speaking in ways that are sensitive to the local context.”

Although we must always present the gospel without distortion, neither adding to nor subtracting from the truth, in order to contextualise we may need to be creative in the way we present and engage people with the biblical message. Just as Jesus told stories, drew analogies with everyday things that people would relate to and would help them to understand and remember the truths he taught. In a visual age the use of art, drama, music and digital presentations may help to impact people and emphasise the message.

### **Examples of contextualising the message and presentation of the gospel**

Take some time to reflect on these two situations in which Paul shared the gospel message in ways that were relevant and appropriate to his audience and their context.

Read Acts 13:13-43 and Acts 17:16-34 and think about the following questions:-

- Who was Paul speaking to and what was the context
- How did he gain an opportunity to speak?
- How did he seek to identify and relate to his audience?
- What background did he establish to help his audience see the relevance of the gospel?
- What essential truths of the gospel did he include and what did he leave out? Why?
- What does he appeal to in order to support and reinforce the message?

- What response did he call for and how did they respond?

There are usually two different contexts in which we may have an opportunity to witness to our faith, one is the unplanned, short term meeting with a stranger, on a train for example. The other is the more long term contact that we have at work, family, friends or those we meet casually at a sports club or night class etc. The following is an example of the one off meeting.

Paul Little gives an outline of the example of how Jesus interacted with the Samaritan woman at the well in John chapter 4:4-26, which could give us some insights into how to approach such situations. The following are the main principles he gives (but without the answers!) so take a look and try to work it out for yourself:-

1. V1-7 what can we learn about how Jesus made the social contact and what cultural barriers did he have to overcome?
2. How did he establish common ground?
3. V10-15 how did Jesus arouse her interest and curiosity?
4. V10-11 how did he get the ball rolling and engage her thinking?
5. V13-19 How did Jesus avoid the conversation closing down and how did he judge how much of the message she was ready for?
6. How did he respond to the woman's lifestyle choices?
7. V20-26 how did he handle the woman's attempt to take the conversation off on to a side issue?
8. Why was it important that Jesus confronted the Samaritan woman directly before he moved on?

Jesus initiated this conversation but at times he was approached by an enquirer and we can listen in on how he handled those situations. The first is Nicodemus in John chapter 3:1-21 and the second is the rich young man in Mark chapter 10:17-23. Although there are three glaring differences from the incident by the well it might be helpful to read them and to ask yourself the same questions and see how Jesus handled them differently and how differently they responded.

It may be that you find it easier with the short term contact with a stranger but really struggle with the on-going contact with family, friends and work colleagues. Our view of them can also be that they are sceptical and cynical and you don't know where to start. Perhaps the best place to start is to think about it as we would a cross cultural situation and to learn about the context, its culture, values, worldview and language. Since our Western culture is predominantly postmodern we need to give some thought as to what that means and how people think in this 'foreign land' so that we can begin to engage with them in a meaningful way.

### **Postmodernism**

These thoughts are taken from an excellent book by Mark Tabb called "Mission to Oz" which helps to both understand our secular, postmodern culture and how to reach people with the gospel in this culture.

He would say that we live on this earth with people who are lost, we know that we have the answer for them in Christ but we have a hard time trying to work out how to reach them. We often think that we can't relate to them, they are so different from us, they would never understand where we are coming from. We may feel that they have grown cold and sceptical about Christianity, if they think about it at all. But that doesn't mean that they are not looking for something real that will change their life and God has put us here to do just that by His grace.

We may not consider that our generation is postmodern, but every generation and the whole of our culture are now influenced by postmodern thinking. Postmodernism has changed all the foundations of society – our sense of right and wrong, our personal ethics which are now exactly that – personal to me. There are no absolutes, everything is relative, “does it work for me?” is the question of the day. Being true to oneself is the ultimate good, not “is it right, ethical or moral?”

Truth is personal – you can have your truth and I will have mine. There is no longer an overarching narrative of received truth, so they are deeply sceptical of the truth of the scriptures which we use as conclusive evidence.

Experience is now valued in the same way that an earlier generation valued material wealth. “People in Oz want to experience all that life can be – to immerse themselves in it and feel a rush of adrenaline and a pounding heartbeat.....they will go anyplace, try anything and pay any amount to feel fully alive.” But this often leads to a short attention span and boredom, so life has to have more and more extreme experiences to get the pay back.

Expert opinions are not valued and are constantly questioned, especially against the latest opinion on the internet. People want to be entertained and this is evidenced in the immense growth in digital entertainment, many of which are so real that they offer a vicarious experience of life.

As a second half age group we can often feel marginalised, unable to keep up and fearing that our life up to now is no longer valued. But we can't put the clocks back and recoil in our culture shock. We have to get to know the new land, the customs of the people and the language they speak. Just like cross-cultural missionaries we have to make the adjustments and understand the culture in order to impact it with eternal truth. But it is not about trying to be something that you are not, just the opposite is true: authenticity is the key to effectiveness.

It may be helpful to look briefly at how we arrived at this postmodern culture. The term was first used in the 1920's but only came on to the Christian radar in the 1990's. Although many have thought of it as belonging to Generation X,Y and Z it has affected all of us, even the 'baby boomers'.

Postmodernism is a world without a centre. Think of a bicycle wheel where the rim is the people/society in general. The spokes of the wheel are the laws, ethics and morals that join the rim (society) to the central axle. The hub of the wheel is something transcendent, greater than ourselves – which is the basis for our laws, ethics, morals and our worldview.

Some time ago people moved away from looking to God as the source for ultimate truth and began to believe that they could discover a centre of their own by reason. So God was removed from the centre to the periphery. He may have created everything and established the laws of nature but now it was up to us to run the show. Man's logic and reason became the basis for morals and ethics and meaning. This is known as Enlightenment Truth.

At the time when societies became industrialised the society moved on to what became known as 'Modern' thinking. People still believed in God but he was further reduced to the realm of feelings and emotions; somewhere to turn in the tough times. Instead modern society turned to government/political ideals and science as the new centre. At its extreme in movements such as Communism and fascism man tried to take God's place completely. Morals and ethics became based on 'the will of the people' or the person in charge. The western world turned to science for all the answers to tough questions and God became largely irrelevant.

Postmodernism arose as people gave up hope in finding some final answer, some transcendent truth that would give meaning to life and some foundation to morals and values. Belief in progress had given way to cynicism and scepticism. Since no one could tell them the answer to life they decided that they needed to carve out an answer for themselves.

But the result has become "A culture that believes it has tried everything, only to discover that nothing works." They no longer ask about THE meaning of life – instead they hope to find a way to impart some meaning to their own lives, some way to make their own life have purpose. What may seem right today may not work tomorrow. Majority votes and opinion polls have taken the place of transcendent truth. What is right depends on what most people think.

Before we become too critical and self-righteous we need to remember that every culture and society is inherently flawed and filled with imperfect human beings. But the Holy Spirit lives in us as believers so that we might speak truth to this generation with the life giving words of Jesus. So how do we go about this task? Train your mind to understand the culture. It is the environment people have grown up in, as well as the context in which we have been called to minister.

People still believe in truth but now it is a personal matter. They believe in what is true for them. They will combine ideas, religious thought and practice or whatever helps them to achieve their goals in life. It is pick and mix truth and gods to fit personal needs and aspirations, New Age, Buddhist, whatever. Every issue comes down to my personal choice even what gender or sexuality a person identifies with is a personal choice and may vary over time. There are no absolutes.

The total immersion in digital media can lead to a confusion between fantasy and real life. Hyper-reality can mean that the images on the screen become more real than real life and the real world. Add to that the many forms of social media that can seriously distort how people see themselves and others and where anything goes but nothing can be trusted, then that leads to people being very sceptical especially of 'facts' and 'truth'.

To reach people in a postmodern age we need to understand how *they* see the world, what questions *they* are asking. They long for something genuine. Spirituality is very popular even though Christianity has been side-lined. But they are confused, not knowing where to look. Because of the craving for experience, post-moderns learn not by the transfer of information but by experiencing it. Experiencing life has become the path whereby life has meaning and how they feel truly alive.

The language we use is important. We may live in a postmodern world but most of us still use 'modern' language when we discuss Jesus, the bible and believing in God. We go through the avenue of science, logic and reason to form conclusions about meaning. We think that the facts and evidence lead to a verdict and consequent belief, because it makes sense (and for some it still might).

In a postmodern world people's minds are wired for pictures, images and not information. They communicate via sharing images – they need to see it. They also communicate through stories "What is your story?" they ask and that is an opportunity to share your testimony (in the right form) and without jargon.

We may feel as if we have nothing to say or to offer to this postmodern world but our message is radical and the call of Christ is absolute and this appeals to the postmodern young person. They need to see the real Jesus. Either they don't know who he is or they may have the wrong ideas. They long for something that is real, something that will give meaning and purpose and that is what Jesus offers

The gospel presents true reality but what we have to get past is their false assumptions about Christianity. The gospel offers value, purpose and freedom – not a list of do's and don'ts. The gospel offers them a relationship with Christ which gives them identity and a sense of worth that they have never known before.

"The primary method by which we can fulfil our mission and make Christ known to a postmodern world is by becoming painfully authentic. We have to be real before our words will mean anything. Even then the message of our life must be louder than the words coming out of our mouths,"

We must have a passion for Jesus and he must be Lord of our lives. We must have a passion for his word and it must be seen to permeate our lives. We must be honest in our sharing of the gospel and not give 'canned' messages. We need to genuinely care for people and be genuine about our own struggles, not presenting a false 'everything is fine' image of our own lives. Postmoderns are also attracted to belonging to a loving and caring community with relationships of trust.

We will never engage effectively with people until we interact with the culture. We cannot hide in our Christian sub-culture. But we must remember that this world's worldview is directly opposite to a biblical worldview. We must make sure that Christ is Lord of our life and that our minds are renewed and transformed by God's Spirit and His Word in order that we do not compromise.

## **How do Postmoderns come to Christ?**

Don Everts and Doug Schaupp ministered on university campuses in the States over many years. They listened to the stories of two thousand postmodern people who have come to follow Jesus. While their stories are diverse and varied, certain common themes emerge. The pathway to Jesus is a mysterious and organic process for postmoderns but they discovered that it goes through discernible phases or thresholds on the way. This is not a process that can be controlled or manipulated. It is God who changes hearts; He is ultimately in control and it is His work.

Although every experience is unique and will vary from person to person and be different according to the context, the stages seem to be broadly the same. There is no guarantee that every person will pass through each phase nor that they will continue the journey. The following is an overview of the five thresholds they identified:-

### **Threshold 1 Trust**

This is the movement from distrust to trust. The person learned to trust a Christian friend. This is the first vital step since genuine friendships are the currency that is valued when religion is suspect and church is weird and for the most part Christians are hypocrites therefore distrust is the norm. If we feel that we are distrusted we can have some negative reactions which will not build trust. For example we can react defensively, or get personally offended. We might begin to judge the person's behaviour or stop caring and begin to avoid the person. We may stay around in an attempt to debate and to try to win the argument. So how do we build trust:-

- Pray - for ourselves and our reactions, for them and their needs.
- Learn – try to understand the world from their point of view, ask questions.
- Bond – identify with their interests, get involved, do things with them.
- Affirm – when we feel the temptation to judge choose to affirm the good you see in them.
- Welcome – when you feel the temptations to argue, welcome them into your life, be hospitable.

### **Threshold 2 Becoming curious**

This is the movement from complacency to curiosity. Complacency can feel good and appeals to the tolerance of the postmodern. But what does curiosity look like:-

- Awareness – suddenly becoming aware of a new and different reality and possibility.
- Engagement – engaging with a Christian, reading a gospel, asking questions.
- Exchange – exchanging ideas, asking about your opinions, listening actively and involved, no longer complacent.

How to provoke curiosity –

- Encourage questions by asking them good questions, awaken their intrigue and don't just give them pat answers. Notice in the gospels how often Jesus asked questions.

- Use parables, again just as Jesus did. See the parables around us today, use films and books etc. to cause discussion about truth.
- Live curiously – Jesus often did things that were countercultural which caused people to pause and think. So don't be fake or try to appear perfect. Don't be afraid to share the things that you are doing and why, it might shake them up.

It is easy to mistake curiosity for seeking and as a result dump the whole gospel on someone and expect a response, when in reality they are just asking questions that are out there but not about the personal implications yet.

### **Threshold 3 Opening up to Change**

This is the hardest threshold to cross. People often want answers but are not looking for an invitation to change. This is an essential step before seriously beginning to seek. How can we help them to face the need for change:-

- Be patient with them and do not put them under pressure.
- Pray for them
- Walk with them on the journey
- Gently challenge them in ways that they need
- Involve them in soul awakening events where they will feel safe to explore spiritual things at arms length and with anonymity

It is amazing when someone passes this threshold and the doors of possibility are opened. This is God's work through His Holy Spirit that overcomes human hesitancy and the fear of change. The person starts asking questions about their own life and how that relates to Jesus; now it has become personal.

### **Threshold 4 Seeking**

Being open to change needs to be followed by seeking. This is purposefully seeking final answers. They are on a quest and there is urgency and purpose. They want answers and they want to come to conclusions. They are seeking to resolve the issues and to make a decision. How do you identify a genuine seeker (not just someone who is curious)?

- Seekers seek Jesus, not just God.
- Seekers count the cost and see the implications. This is not just fire insurance or mental assent to a belief system, this will cost.
- Seekers spend time with Christians, become part of the community and feel included socially as well as spiritually. They will happily attend church and Bible study.

Helping people become seekers:-

- Show them how to build their lives on Jesus' words.
- Open up your prayer life to them.
- Provide satisfying answers to their questions. Personal, real life answers not just apologetics.

- Be honest and open with them. Live out the Kingdom before them, not just the good stuff, but share your struggles as well.
- Model seeking in your own life, get into the scriptures together, both learning.

When our friends are ready to enter the Kingdom, when they have sought and sought and see in Jesus what they have always been looking for, they have a choice: to sell all and get it or walk away. To sell all is threshold five.

### **Threshold 5 Entering the Kingdom**

When the seeker is willing to 'sell all' and follow Christ there needs to be a definite decision and commitment. Jesus painted a clear picture of this threshold Matthew 13:44-46 where both the field containing hidden treasure and the discovery of the pearl of great price required selling all in order to gain the treasure they had found.

Thresholds two and three are open ended and pressure free but at threshold five that is not helpful. It is not helpful to just let people slide casually or vaguely across the line. It may sound very sensitive and postmodern but it can keep people from even knowing that there is a line to cross. We want to help them to move from being lost to being redeemed. This could appear to be just like traditional evangelism expecting people to come to a decision and then make a commitment but the difference is each of the previous thresholds they went through to get to this place.

But true seeking will not last for long. The posture of seeking is hard to maintain so there needs to be an appropriate urgency at this final threshold. There are some ways that we can help them along:-

- Ask them explicitly and simply are they ready to enter the Kingdom.
- If they say no, ask them why. What are their questions or blocks?
- Honestly help them either to resolve or to set aside what is keeping them from choosing Christ.
- Help them to focus on Christ and the central issues not to get side tracked on non-essentials.
- Study passages from the gospels that deal with lostness and salvation to emphasise the seriousness of their need.
- Give them the opportunity to hear the stories of other believers and how they came to Christ and the difference that it has made to them.
- Prayer is vital since it is a spiritual battle.
- They need a clear, but not oversimplified explanation of the gospel, of what Jesus calls us to and what it means to follow him. They need to know exactly what they are committing themselves to. Don't use clichés that don't mean anything to them.
- This final threshold, this decision to repent and to enter the Kingdom of God, is part of a much longer process, an intense, spiritual, emotional and mysterious process that has been going on over time. There is a sense of urgency and desire on our part that they finally cross the line but we must not oversimplify nor water down what it means nor hustle them into a premature 'decision'.

- Make sure that they understand repentance and the cost of discipleship.
- Help them to understand that turning to Christ in repentance and faith is not just a transaction but a transformation and the beginning of a relationship with “Christ in you the hope of glory”.

When someone has decided that they are ready to become a Christian and understands the implications of their commitment then you could ask them if they would rather pray with you or on their own, but which ever they choose it would help them to have some idea what to pray. The following is a simple out line that is easy to remember:-

- A. Admit that they have not been living God’s way and want to get right with Him. (To repent i.e. to turn from going their own way to going God’s way)
- B. Believe that God in Christ has done everything necessary for them to be forgiven and restored to a right relationship with God.
- C. Consider the cost of discipleship. Jesus must be Lord as well as Saviour.
- D. Do. They need to reach out in faith and personally receive the gift of God’s forgiveness and the new life that He offers them.

#### **What is our commitment to them as a new believer?**

##### *Secure their commitment:-*

Help them to understand what has happened to them and deal with any questions or issues that arise. Help them to have assurance of their salvation based on the scriptures not on their feelings. Pray with them and for them.

##### *Establish them in life long habits that will sustain them:-*

The scriptures – how to feed themselves

Prayer – how to talk with God

Fellowship – to meet with and share their lives with other believers.

Witnessing – to their new found faith in Christ

##### *Establishing them in the body of Christ:-*

Help them to begin to relate to a community of believers to get them established in the Body of Christ. When they have found those, who will encourage and help them, it is time to hand them over so that it is not so intense or it may become unhealthy or dependant.

Everts and Schaupp conclude by saying “But in the end, we realise that it is not enough. As helpful as this tool may be, it is really not enough. The reality is we each need to make a decision to serve our non-Christian friends.....It takes effort and energy to serve our friends, finding out where they are in their journey and stretching ourselves to help them along right where they are. In Jesus, may we all serve by laying down our own lives (and preferences and expertise and habits) and washing the feet of our wonderful postmodern friends and neighbours.”

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