

The Gospel of Jesus Christ: An Evangelical Celebration

Lesson 13: The Application of the Gospel

Statement 5. We affirm that the Church is commanded by God and is therefore under divine obligation to preach the Gospel to every living person (Luke 24:47; Mt. 28:18-19). We deny that any particular class or group of persons, whatever their ethnic or cultural identity, may be ignored or passed over in the preaching of the Gospel (1 Cor. 9:19-22). God purposes a global Church made up from people of every tribe, language and nation (Rev. 7:9).

Statement 18. We affirm that Jesus Christ commands his followers to proclaim the Gospel to all living persons, evangelizing everyone everywhere, and discipling believers within the fellowship of the Church. A full and faithful witness to Christ includes the witness of personal testimony, godly living, and acts of mercy and charity to our neighbor, without which the preaching of the Gospel appears barren. We deny that the witness of personal testimony, godly living, and acts of mercy and charity to our neighbors constitute evangelism apart from the proclamation of the Gospel.

I. The Mandate of the Gospel: Gleanings from the Great Commission (Mt. 28:18-19)

- Although Jesus commanded the Eleven, he did so *in their role as disciples*. Therefore, all who claim to be a disciple of Jesus are bound to this command.
- Jesus did not command the Church *per se*, but individual members who make up the Church. This is no decree for a “church growth” movement. It is a proof-text for every individual believer to “do the work of an evangelist” (2 Tim. 4:5; cf., also Lk. 24:47; Jn. 20:21; 2 Cor. 10:1-5; 1 Pt. 3:15).
- There is no other plan in place for God to bring salvation to the lost but by a faithful presentation of the Gospel message (cf., Jn. 17:20; Rom. 10:14-15).
- Though entrance into the kingdom is exclusively through Jesus Christ, members of the kingdom are included without distinction (“all nations,” also see Rom. 10:12).
- Making disciples of “all nations” does not necessarily entail leaving our homes or even our neighborhoods and workplaces.
- A commitment to the Gospel is necessarily Trinitarian (“in” or “into the name [note: singular] of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit”).
- Making disciples does not stop with a profession of faith. Although “baptizing” is coordinate with a profession, “teaching them to obey” is a life-long enterprise.
- There must be an observable balance in the Great Commission. “If non-Christians are not hearing the gospel and not being challenged to make a decision for Christ, then the church has disobeyed one part of Jesus’ commission. If new converts are not faithfully and lovingly nurtured in the whole counsel of God’s revelation, then the church has disobeyed the other part” (Blomberg, *Matthew*, p. 433).
- Churches *and individuals* should be able to measure some degree of effectiveness in both evangelism and edification (on the latter see Rom. 15:1-2, 14). Otherwise, the Church is not being the Church and disciples are not being disciples.

II. The Mode of the Gospel

A. *Points of Reference: Worldview Evangelism*¹

1. We no longer have a generation gap; we have a worldview gap in Western culture. Assumptions we took for granted 25 years ago are no longer true in a postmodern culture:
 - a) The Bible has two testaments, Old and New, begins with the one true God, records the Fall of Adam and Eve, and presents Jesus as the sin-bearer.
 - b) History is linear and moves with purpose.
 - c) The vertical and horizontal emblem worn round the neck is not a “plus” sign, but God’s wonderful sign of redemption and forgiveness.
 - d) Death is not the end of our existence.
 - e) Real differences exist between good and evil, truth and error, right and wrong, fact and fiction.

2. Without connectors into another's frame of reference, communication is impossible. The Gospel will remain isolated unless some links are established that build bridges to other worldviews.
3. The most effective *modus operandi* for building bridges to another's worldview is listening compassionately, learning comprehensively, and looking for open doors to engage them interactively with the Gospel message.
 - a) Find out where the person is at in their spiritual pilgrimage by asking what they believe.
 - b) Discover how they got there and why they believe what they do.
 - c) Demonstrate genuine concern and admit the universal desires and complexities that we all share.
 - d) Confess that your convictions and beliefs are in process and they were not always as clear to you as they may now be.
 - e) Define words like sin, salvation, God, Bible, et al. Use synonyms where possible (sin = rebellion, God = Creator, salvation = promise of eternal life with God).
4. Worldview evangelism is as much relational as it is rational.
 - a) We must be known not only for our confession but also for our character.
 - b) Be ready not only to define and defend the Christian faith, but also be a people of truth, integrity, respect, humility, and authenticity. In a "Word", we must exhibit evidence of God's presence in our lives (Gal. 5:22-23).
 - c) Typically, we first establish an ethos and pathos before demonstrating the relevance of the Logos.

B. *Points of Relevance: Personal Testimony*

"If Christ is not relevant outside the church, he is insignificant inside the church. If our faith is bound to the inner chambers of the Christian community, it is at best a disobedient faith, and at worst, no faith at all . . . the Christian must embrace the world as the theater of redemptive activity" (Susan Hecht, *Telling the Truth*, p. 254).

1. Postmodern people live in a lonely universe where the only voice to be heard is their own.²
 - a) As God's ambassadors we carry a message of hope that replaces alienation with reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:19).
 - b) "It is not good for man [woman] to be alone." We were created to be social and the hope of spending eternity in endless joy with God breaks the silence of despair and depression. To have eternal life is to know "the God who is there" (Jn. 17:3).
2. In an age where the Church simply does not matter, is neither harmful nor helpful, and remnants of any substantial "Christian memory" are all but lost in our culture, community is a powerful means of demonstrating relevance to the lonely soul (Jn. 13:33-34; Acts 2:42-47).
3. 1 Cor. 9:19-22 clearly teaches us to be creative in our strategies so as to communicate the Gospel.
 - a) In effect, Paul is saying that non-verbal communication is vital to our effectiveness in sharing the Gospel (63-95% of all communication is non-verbal).
 - b) Paul is not promoting situation ethics (e.g., "to the liar, I became a liar"). In the morally neutral things of life, believers are to act with acuity and discernment before censuring societal mores. Accommodation without compromise is Paul's heart and should also be ours.
 - c) Sadly, it's far easier to be a separatist or simply indulge in culture than to think deeply about how the Gospel can be advanced in our lives. Put differently, *the balance between freedom and restraint and the dangers of assimilation versus isolation are perennial concerns that require us to take a hard look at how we order our lives as we remove barriers to the reception of the Gospel.*

C. *Points of Response:*

1. We must get people to see that the Gospel message does not call for a mere decision, it calls for conversion—a radical change in thinking, believing, and living. Conversion entails a Person to follow as well as a gift to be received.
2. Decisions are what we see outwardly; conversions are what God does inwardly. More often than not, those whose “conversion” doesn’t stick may be more of a problem with our evangelism than our follow-up strategies.
3. We must take the time to get people to understand the entire Gospel message rather than offering a “3-minute testimony” or some truncated view of the cross. Exposure to the Gospel is not the same as understanding and committing to it.
4. Most of those whom we engage with Gospel truth will have to radically forsake some central beliefs and behaviors to become Christian (e.g., Jesus is one way among many, the idea that sin is person-relative and not an affront to a holy God, principled submission to the moral precepts of God’s Word is optional). In essence, there must be a call to repentance as well as faith.
5. Our response should be that we learn to think like a missionary, developing sensitive and relevant ways to bridge the gap between disparate worldviews. We must intentionally see our neighbors, friends, co-workers, and world as God’s mission field (Mt. 9:37). Every home should be staged as mission outposts for demonstrating the love of God to advance the kingdom of God in our neighborhoods.

III. Methods of Gospel Presentation

A. *Theological Dialogue*

1. Jesus and Nicodemus (Jn. 3:1-15)
2. Peter and the Jews on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:14-36)
3. The writer of Hebrews convincing the Jewish believers to stand fast in light of the OT substance found in Christ

B. *Personal Testimony*

1. Paul before King Agrippa (Acts 26:1-32)
2. Samaritan woman led others to Jesus by sharing her encounter with Him (Jn. 4:28-30)

C. *Intimate Discussion*

1. Jesus uses the idolatry of riches to call the rich young ruler to faith (Mt. 19:1-6)
2. Jesus poignant insight into the Samaritan woman’s futile efforts to find “Mr. Right,” coupled with his endearing love and acceptance of her despite her social status, offers to fill her empty life with “streams of living water” (Jn. 4:16-18).
3. Jesus issues a personal rebuke to Nicodemus for not knowing the truths of salvation (Jn. 3:10).
4. Illustrations used include water, well, wind, knowledge of Commandments.

D. *Historical/Biblical Presentation*

1. In Acts 13:16-41 Paul uses Scripture and history to demonstrate to a biblically literate audience that Jesus is the Messiah (v. 23), put to death in fulfillment of prophecy (v. 27-29), resurrected just as the Scriptures foretold (vv. 30-37), offering forgiveness and justification (vv. 38-39), and warning of God’s judgment against unbelief (vv. 40-41).
2. The Gospels and Acts are historical accounts of the fulfillment of Scripture and the advent of the Kingdom of God in the coming of Jesus of Nazareth.

E. *Philosophical Defense/Worldview Evangelism (Acts 17:16-34)*

1. The Athenian context:
 - a) The Roman world enforced all kinds of religious pluralism both politically and legally and Athens was the heart and soul of competing worldviews.
 - b) Paul faced sophisticated intellectual systems in the various philosophies like the Epicureans and Stoics (and no doubt others like sophism and atheistic materialists that Luke does not mention).
 - c) A sneering condescension was evident, *just as it is in our day* (v. 18).
2. The Gospel in a pluralistic society
 - a) Paul was sensitive to the spiritual conflict and took action (vv. 16-17)
 - b) He was uncompromising in presenting the truth (v. 18) as he clearly stated that they were not worshipping the true God (v. 23),
 - c) He attempted to put the seekers' concerns in a favorable light in order to keep communication open and to demonstrate respect (v. 22; cf., 1 Pt. 3:15).
 - d) He identified and utilized common ground by affirming a common Creator and Provider as well as our common human condition (one of contingency and dependency). While reasoning with Jews, Paul used Scripture (Acts 13:16-41, 17:2), whereas when reasoning with the secular world Paul appealed to God's general revelation in nature, history, and the human heart (cf., Acts 14:14-17; 17:24).
 - e) Paul affirmed that all have been fashioned by God to long for a relationship with Him (v. 27).
 - f) He used logic to demonstrate that God, the Creator, could not possibly be the product of the creature. Because humans are God's creation, idolatry is not only forbidden but also absurd (v. 29)! Paul never used the word "sin" but made it clear that idolatry is blameworthy.
 - g) Paul insisted that history is going somewhere. He also insisted that everyone is accountable to God, guilty before God, and in need of repentance (v. 30).
 - h) Paul appeals to the historical evidence of the resurrection and states that God appointed Jesus as Judge.
 - i) Some responded with scorn and mockery while others politely dismiss it. But a few did respond to God's gracious call, despite the evident diversity and plurality of culture (vv. 32-34).
3. Though Paul did not quote Scripture, his appeal was thoroughly scriptural. He used reason and common ground to make his case.

In Summary:

Every NT gospel presentation combines content with conviction and commitment. It involves identifying common reference points, touching the human heart with profound personal relevance, and calling all without distinction to respond in faith and repentance. My hope is that this series on *The Gospel of Jesus Christ: An Evangelical Celebration* has incited in you a fresh and long-standing passion to communicate this grand Gospel of God for the praise of His glorious grace. Amen.

¹ I'm indebted to D. A. Carson's *The Gagging of God* and his chapter "Athens Revisited" in *Telling the Truth: Evangelizing Postmoderns* for this notion, and many other aspects presented in this lesson.

² Ibid. p. 183.