

Is the Gospel Cool? Should it Be?

The gospel of Jesus Christ will always be true, life-giving, refreshing, glorious, stunning. But it will never be cool.

The core proclamations of the New Testament's teachings on human sin and divine redemption ultimately are offensive to fallen humanity; this is clear from Matthew to Revelation. And as our culture's approval of certain types of evil escalates and the denigration of marriage increases, anyone calling sin what the Bible says it is will find himself marginalized, merely tolerated, or subject to overt hostility.

At the same time, this truth is no pretext for abandoning the winsomeness, cultural sensitivity, and persuasiveness Scripture calls Christians to employ as they share the Good News. These qualities are among the tools the Holy Spirit uses to open eyes and make sinful men and women amenable to His work in their salvation.

Winsomeness is graciousness in manner and tone. It is the extension of kindness, respect, and compassion to one's opponents. It advances reason without malice or a desire to intellectually humiliate one's challenger.

Winsomeness does not mean surrendering one's position or the truth one seeks to defend and demonstrate but, rather, to express the arguments for one's contentions from a heart of love for God, the truth itself, and one's audience, whether an individual or an entire culture.

It is also to demonstrate in action and tone that Christ is real, and that when His followers storm the gates of Hell they do so for the purpose of liberating its prisoners, not destroying them. It is strength with warmth, resolution without grimness, joy unmixed with syrup.

Cultural sensitivity means not being unaware of popular forms of expression in dress and speech, of popular entertainments and sporting events, of such social trends as hip-hop, the iPhone, and ethnic eateries. And, to the extent consistent with Scripture, enjoying them.

Cultural sensitivity does not mean an idolatrous desperation to be thought “normal” such that transformation in Christ gets tossed aside in favor of cultural acceptability. It does not mean reading books better left unopened, even if best-sellers, or fixating on the frivolous, transient accoutrements of extemporaneous trends. Loving the unredeemed and trying to reach them, on the one hand, and loving the world itself (and wanting its approbation), on the other, are very different things.

Persuasion means to employ means that change hearts and minds such that they are receptive to the truth and then accept it as such. Paul told the Corinthians, “knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade men” (2 Cor. 5:11). The word he uses for persuasion derives from the Greek verb *peitho*, from which we get our word “pathetic.” It connotes the idea of being moved emotionally (its Latin counterpart is the word “persuadeo,” as in “persuasion”).

So, Christians are to be winsome—gracious, warm, and appealing—without compromising the content of the truth or becoming lachrymose or obsequious.

We are to be culturally sensitive without forgetting that truth, however attractively packaged, slashes false arguments and pretensions against the will of God—things offensive to a world that hates our Master and, thus, sometimes at least, you and me.

We are to be persuasive without being fawning, winning without lying, cogent without trimming the sometimes rough edges of intellectual honesty,

Among American Evangelicals, our success in these efforts is, at best, mixed. Recently my friend Dr. Peter Jones, Executive Director of the TruthXChange and former professor at California's Westminster Seminary wrote a kind but direct piece about the recent "Q" event in New York. Here is an excerpt:

"Q"'s thirty-something founder, Gabe Lyons, engages with high-powered leaders from all faiths and backgrounds to show that "Evangelical" Christianity is capable of promoting intelligent, respectful dialogue-for the common good and human flourishing.

However (at) the last Q Conference in Boston, (April 2015) ... 1,300 top Christian leaders were exposed to teaching by David Gushee and Matthew Vines (together with Andrew Sullivan, the homosexual Washington pundit), defending the "Christian Gay" movement. Certainly Gabe Lyons did not endorse their convictions, but one has to wonder if publically airing the issue, in such an important "Evangelical" forum, in a cool kind of way, with its influence on younger Christians, may indeed bestow a certain legitimacy on such a biblically unsupportable position and thus threaten the on-going health of Christian orthodoxy ...

Q's cool motto: "Stay Curious. Think Well. Advance Good," in this case, without serious scrutiny, can be costly. We must articulate a clear and compelling cosmological discourse before it is too late. In fact, to "advance" the "not good" situation, God created the heterosexual structure of marriage, in which man and woman are perfectly fitted.

Responding to critics, Lyons said, "Some people are afraid that if those who are theologically progressive are invited, it suggests they hold an equally valid idea ... We still believe the historic view of sexuality is true, but we are also confident that the trueness of that view can carry its own weight."

Gabe Lyons has done and continues to do much good. He understands the vitality of culture to all men and the need for Christians to integrate into the many facets of social experience to bear witness to the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

Yet while I applaud Lyons' personal allegiance to orthodoxy, his giving a platform to those who teach error was unwise. Vines and Gushee are enmeshed in false theology. Their views on human sexuality, which are grounded in exegetical and historical fallacies, are heretical. Hosting them is not like hosting persons with opposing views of covenantalism and dispensationalism or congregationalism and elder rule. Instead, by elevating Vines and Gushee to positions of public prominence, Q and other forums have engaged in the theological equivalent of inviting an Arian on-stage to talk about whether or not we should redefine the deity of Christ.

Faithful Evangelicals should not give legitimacy to those whose views on homosexuality are anti-scriptural and whose agenda is based, in some cases, on their desire to rationalize their own sin. I say that humbly—I like to rationalize my sin, too, but recognize that the immutable, clear, and finally authoritative Word of God gives me no room to redefine it. We should give no space to those who are committed to advancing an anti-biblical agenda.

Dialog is valuable, but it's hard to envision Paul sitting calmly with his Galatian opponents and "exchanging views" on the nature of justification and the atonement. I enjoy rich fellowship with my charismatic and Pentecostal brothers, although we disagree on the application of the "glossa" passages in the New Testament. I attended a Baptist seminary although I believe in presbyterian governance. I dislike alcohol, but fellowship happily with believing wine connoisseurs. And so on. Yet falsehood and error are in a separate category.

And, contra Lyons, while the truth indeed can defend itself,

many in his audience have truth-detectors emaciated from years of poor teaching and spiritual immaturity. Robust dialog is not the same as false teaching, the latter of which is so appealing that orthodox Christians have been fighting it since, essentially, Jesus's ascension. "Civil" discussion with error means some will accept that error, and believers should not welcome it into "the camp." With respect, therefore: Many in the "Q" audience don't need to hear dialog; they need to be taught what's biblically true and what isn't.

Vines and Gushee contort Scripture's teachings about human sexuality—and some younger Evangelicals, unprepared for the exegetical gymnastics these errant teachers employ to achieve their theological ends, accept the Vines/Gushee narrative with relief that for them, the cultural battle over sexual ethics is over. Sadly, this is a relief animated by error and actuated by surrender.

By jettisoning the Bible's clear, fixed, and enduring teaching about human sexuality, Vines and Gushee call evil good and good evil. In doing so, they minimize sin and thus, the very heart of the atonement: Christ died for sinners. If homosexual behavior is not sinful, the Bible is lying and Jesus's affirmation of it was inaccurate and misleading. Thus, as a Savior, he flunks a rather basic test: If we can redefine the Bible's definition of what constitutes sin, for what purpose did He die?

Matthew Vines, David Gushee, and their theological peers deserve personal kindness and respect. Attacking them as persons is wrong, period. Yet even as faithful believers pray for their repentance from error, they also deserve public reproof for their abandonment of revealed truth and, until they repent, be given no platform in Evangelical churches, conferences, or other venues.

When Paul appeared to the Athenian philosophers on Mars Hill, he was winsome, culturally sensitive, and persuasive. His

message, writes the University of North Carolina's George Alexander Kennedy, was

... adapted to Greek ears: it is not the prophecy of the Old Testament that is fulfilled but the Greeks' own search for the unknown god, who is the God of all mankind. Paul does not attempt the dialectical reasoning of a Greek orator or philosopher: he proclaims the gospel, but the proclamation is supported by a Greek quotation: "As even some of your poets have said" (Acts 17:28). Then comes the usual call to repentance and warning of judgment ... God has given assurance of this by raising his son from the dead ...

Paul did not compromise the message of the gospel. The idioms and style of speech he employed were consistent with those of his audience. The content of the message remained unpolluted and uncompromised. He spoke with compassion and conviction, sensitivity and boldness.

The result? "When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed. But others said, 'We will hear you again concerning this matter'" (Acts 17:32).

Sneers and interest: About what one might expect for a first-time hearing about Jesus from educated pagan elites. Probably about what we'd get today if, say, Paul were to present to the philosophy faculty at Princeton (although emboldened by their secure tenure and the contemporary erosion of civility, the sneers of many academics more likely would be verbal attacks).

In probing, frank, and somewhat jeremiad-like piece in *Mere Orthodoxy*, Jake Meador ** writes that **"Evangelicalism's biggest problem with regards to those outside evangelicalism isn't our image, it's our beliefs."** (emphasis mine). This is one of those rare quotes that resonates with exceptional volume because it is so obviously true but much too rarely said. Meador expands the point further:

"If the issue actually was that most cultural elites outside

of the church simply didn't understand what we actually believed and had all sorts of wrong ideas from seeing one too many stories about Fred Phelps, then maybe a rebranding campaign could "work" in the way that marketing campaigns work. Trying to convince everyone outside the church that we're cool and "get it" and care about all the things Portlandia hipsters care about would get us somewhere. I'm not sure it's a place worth going, mind, but it'd be something.

But the events of the past five years, or at least the past three years, should make it abundantly clear that ours is not a credibility problem. The issues are much greater than that ... what we're actually talking about are two societies that have beliefs about the basic nature of reality that are fundamentally antagonistic to one another. Note that they aren't simply fundamentally different, but antagonistic. Set next to a difference of that nature, the attempts at finding superficial similarities look rather silly—which is precisely what they are."

Meador follows with another intellectual fast-ball:

"If ours is a problem of credibility, then we begin thinking less about the core elements of the Christian life and public ministry and more about managing perceptions, convincing people that we aren't like those Christians, and so on.

The trouble with this approach is that when you begin behaving like a marketer, that's what you become. And the clear presentation of the faith is lost amidst a thousand qualifications as you apologize for this awful Christian and try to distinguish yourself from that embarrassing group. By the time you're done clearing your throat and awkwardly laughing at those silly evangelicals all you've succeeded in doing is confusing the room and causing no small number of people to wonder what exactly you do believe. But, then,

clarity isn't really the point if you're a marketer. Getting the sale is."

There is nothing more countercultural than living for Jesus Christ. It is far more shocking to see someone following Him with abandon than seeing someone with a bauble protruding from her cheek (as I saw on a recent visit to a restaurant).

We should share the gospel in manner commensurate with those with whom we are sharing it: In telling children about Jesus, you might start with Veggie Tales instead of "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." As Paul says, "I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win even more ... I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. This I do for the gospel's sake, that I might partake of it with you" (1 Cor. 9:19-23).

Yet although God calls us to be *fools for Christ's sake* (1 Cor. 4:10) in the proclamation of the cross and the Crucified One, which abrade human pride far as the curse is found (1 Cor. 1:18, Gal. 6:14), *He does not call us to make fools of ourselves* in attempting to be liked and approved of by the lost and dying or by false teachers and those professing Christians for whom the scratching of their ears is a greater priority than the healing of men's hearts (2 Tim. 4:3).

The most winsome, culturally sensitive, and persuasive Man who ever lived was scourged, spat upon, and nailed to a rough-hewn cross. In downplaying or even ignoring these realities, we lose whatever "relevance" we frenetically seek to obtain.

In a recent hymn, contemporary Christian singer Chris August writes of his own allegiance to something perennially unpopular in our culture yet eternally powerful in its effect: The gospel of Jesus Christ. In his prayer to his Lord, August says,

*I will tell of what You've done, when the people ask me why
I live my life this way I'll say that I am unashamed of*

*The gospel, the cross, the good news for the lost
The blood that spilled down Calvary's Hill
For what Your grace did and what Your grace does*

Chris August is culturally sensitive as well as winsome, and his songs are moving. He is also unashamed of a bloody cross. Is not that awfully good news? And shouldn't we be sharing it without qualification, shame, or hesitation?

God is love, Christ is Lord, and the Gospel is true. These truths, unmolded by culture and immune to its approval or disapproval, are much better and greater than cool will ever be.

** Some of Meador's other comments are a bit strong, but the thrust of his piece and the quotes extracted from it are rewarding and penetrating, not to mention brave.

Rob Schwarzwald serves as Senior Vice President for the Family Research Council.