

Presenting the Gospel to Non-Christians

If you're going to preach to the unchurched, you need to think like a missionary. Imagine that you were going to be communicating the gospel to people who didn't speak your language, they weren't from your culture, and you had to go across the sea to be with them. There would be a few assumptions you would just not make. You wouldn't assume that they knew what you knew, you wouldn't assume that they cared about what you cared about, and you wouldn't assume that they are aware that they are in need of God's forgiveness. I'd like to suggest that those are the same three assumptions we need today if we're going to communicate the gospel to people who are unchurched, even if they are in our own country and even if they speak our language.

First, they don't know what you know, so explain it to them. I'm a teacher of preaching, and one of the required assignments for my students is to write an evangelistic sermon in which they are trying to communicate the gospel to unchurched people, and it will even have an invitation at the end where people can respond and make a decision for Christ. Every year I'll have students tell me they don't know how to communicate the gospel to people who don't share their faith. In fact, I've even had students tell me they're not really into theology or they understand it's important but they actually prefer leadership or they like the social and relational part of ministry. However, when those same students write their sermons, they sound like theologians and what's worse is that they sound like they're writing for theologians. Why? Simply put, we don't know how to communicate our faith to people who don't share our beliefs. We haven't had enough practice.

So what I'm going to suggest is that we have to communicate

the gospel in our preaching in a way that the audience will understand. This is going to involve both biblical passages and theology. For instance, in the same preaching class, I'll have my students look at a popular Christian song. It can be a well-known hymn or even a worship song from Jesus Culture or Hillsong. I'll ask them, "If you had to translate this song in such a way that someone who has never read the Bible and has never been to church before would understand its meaning, could you do so?"

It's amazing to me how difficult students find it to take ideas they've grown up with all their lives and express them to someone who has never heard them before. But remember what C.S. Lewis taught us: "The true test of mastery is not using jargon; any fool can do that. The true test of mastery is when you take a complicated idea and explain it in such a way that anyone could understand." Another way you can practice this is to take a biblical passage and when you're looking at it when preparing your sermon or preparing your lesson, ask yourself, "If I were unchurched and this were the first time I was ever looking at this Bible passage, what in this passage that might confuse me?" Let me give an example—John 3:16 says, "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life." This sounds clear and familiar, but imagine if it were your very first time hearing anyone use that verse. You might find yourself asking questions like, "If I am never going to die, or if I am going to have eternal life, does that mean that my heart will never stop? Does that mean I become bulletproof? If God has a Son, who is His wife?" You might think some of those questions are silly, but remember that's because you're familiar with the material. A missionary would never assume their audience knows what they know, and in order to communicate to the unchurched, we can't make that assumption either.

So what are some things you can do when you're explaining

theology or explaining the Bible that will help people who don't have your background understand what you're trying to say? I would like to offer a few suggestions: First, be sure that you use the power of restatement. Restatement can be utilized in a variety of ways. For instance, you can say something in a different way even though it's the same idea. So, for instance, repetition says, "God loves you. God loves you. God loves you." The restatement says, "God loves you." If He slept, you would be the first person on his mind and the last one He was thinking about when he fell asleep. He would take your artwork and put it on heaven's refrigerator for the angels to see. You are the apple of His eye, and if you were the only one here on Earth, He still would want to have a relationship with you. In other words, God loves you. Something else you can do is comparison and contrast. Sometimes helping people understand what something doesn't mean will then help them better understand what it actually means. Let's take John 3:16 as an example. When you look at that passage you see that Jesus is explaining God's love to Nicodemus a religious leader. Now Nicodemus believed God loved, that God loves Israel, God loves people who are devoutly religious, but Jesus expands His boundaries by helping them to see that God loves the whole world. The window of heaven is not so limited that it just shines down on the geography of ancient Israel, but instead that ray of light is around the entire planet. What I just did was use comparison and contrast to help you understand this idea. Another way you can use restatement besides comparison and contrast and besides restating by using different descriptors is by using synonyms.

You can find words that are synonymous with the word or the idea that you're needing to drive home. For instance, Romans 5:5 states, "God demonstrates His love for us in this that while we are still sinners Christ died to save the ungodly." If I were preaching out of this passage, I might say "demonstrates, proves, evidences, give us something that we

can observe empirically.” Using synonyms, I restated the idea in such a way that it was clear, and it could be impressed upon them. I’m not suggesting there’s never a place for jargon or for technical language. For instance, if I were preaching a sermon that had the word propitiation in it—that’s a powerful and good word for an unchurched person to learn, but remember, I can’t expect that they will already know it. Instead, I might say something like, “He is the propitiation for our sins.” That means that He is the atoning sacrifice, that he covers the bad things we did. He removes the guilt that we earned and it was His idea in the first place. Remember, a missionary will never assume their audience knows what they know. Therefore, they’re going to explain it. The second assumption that a missionary wouldn’t make when thinking about an audience that was unchurched or unfamiliar with their message is that the audience values what they value. In fact, what I think we need to do in our preaching is recognize that unchurched people are not going to see the same things that we think are important as important. I have a former student, a really sharp church planter in a major metropolitan area, who told me recently about a conversation he had with an atheist. The atheist said to him, “You know, in all honesty, I’m probably more of an agnostic. I don’t really know if God exists; in fact, I don’t really know what happens to us after we die, but the truth is I don’t care that much.”

My student, who had been raised in church all of his life, thought, “Who doesn’t care about the questions of God’s existence or what happens to us after we die?” Apparently this person didn’t, and apparently there are some unchurched people who don’t! We are raised to believe that certain things are valuable and that we must build our lives around them, but we can’t assume our audience believes the same things or values the same things. This means that in our preaching, we are not going to assume that they value what we value, instead we’ve got to show them why they should value it. There are two examples I can think of in the Bible that I think will really

help us here. There's a story about Jesus in John 4 where he meets the Samaritan woman. Now the Samaritans did have a bit of religious background, and if you look at the conversation found in John 4, it appears this woman did as well. But as you look at the story more closely you realize that the woman was living her life in such a way that she did not value what religion it taught her to value. What she did value, however, was where she was able to get water, specifically, where could she get some running water, and where could she get it frequently.

Jesus engages her in a conversation about water, and she still thinks are talking about real water. Then He slowly moves the conversation to living water and again, she still thinks that they are talking about actual water. As it turns out, they're now talking about spiritual water and He shows her that He has a water that's going to satisfy her, and it's not just going to help her physically, but it's going to help her spiritually, and it's going to help her emotionally as well. Jesus understood that she may not value what it is that she needed to value, so he had to show her why it was important that she listened to His message.

Another example of this is found where Paul is preaching in Mars Hill. You might remember this in the city of Athens, where he goes to a region where philosophers and poets would gather together, and they would discuss ideas of the day. It was almost as if people were in a chat room of the first century, or they were in a coffee shop, or maybe a meet-up group of the first century where they were kicking around these ideas. Rather than begin with the Bible, Paul begins with their poets and philosophers. He begins with something they value and he helps them see that what he values is something they should care about. He begins with the poets and philosophers, and then makes his way through the doctrine of creation through natural theology to the idea that God had sent His Son for the world. It was a brilliant strategy, and I

think it still works today. Remember, a good missionary is not going to assume the audience knows what he knows, nor is he going to assume the audience cares about what he cares about. In our preaching we need to keep this in mind.

The third assumption a missionary is not going to make is that the audience is aware of their need for forgiveness. I can remember hearing the great teacher of preaching Haddon Robinson say that he had done a study of the sermons of Charles Spurgeon, the great prince of preachers, from an earlier century, and Spurgeon, Haddon claimed, was assuming something in his sermons (that is after having done this this analysis of all of the Spurgeon sermons). Robinson said to our seminary classroom, "Spurgeon assumes something." He assumed that the audience feels guilty. Preaching in the time in which he did (Victorian England), it made sense that he assumed that his audience feels guilty. Most people probably were either trying to be Christian, thought they should be Christian or planned on one day becoming a Christian, and of course, many identified with being Christian. So he could assume that what they were doing or failing to do was all in light of Christianity.

Robinson then turned to our seminary class and said, "We can no longer make that assumption. We can no longer assume that people are aware of their need for forgiveness." That means that in our preaching, we need to show people and reveal to people that they are indeed in need of forgiveness. I would like to make a few suggestions about ways you can do this. First, you can point out how important it is that our motives are right, not just your actions. Second, zero in on their passions. What is it they really get excited about? Are they things that are noble or the things that are embarrassing? Notice the way that Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount doesn't just talk about actual expressions of the law that are found only in behavior, but He talks about motive. He talks about what's going on in the inner parts of a human being, and I

think what you'll discover is that even if someone who's unchurched is a good person who pays their taxes and doesn't cheat on their spouse, when matters of the heart are discussed, they'll discover that they may be more need of forgiveness than they realized.

Another important strategy in helping people see their need for forgiveness is the preacher learning to communicate the right amount of transparency, their own testimony. How did you used to be? What was it that helped you see your need for forgiveness? How did you receive that forgiveness and how can the person listening receive that forgiveness as well? What I've discovered is that when we share our testimonies and are communicating the gospel to unchurched people, they will have a better understanding of what it actually looks like to see your need for forgiveness and more importantly what it actually looks like to embrace that forgiveness. It's my opinion that if you're going to be an effective communicator and an effective preacher to the unchurched, you have to think like a missionary. A missionary is not going to assume that the audience knows what she knows or that they understand they are in need of God's forgiveness. Therefore, it's going to be important that we shape our sermons in such a way that we help them understand what it is that we have already learned.

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