

Good news for God's world

Advance in Faith Unit 108

Week 3 — The gospel in our culture



Crossing the cultural divide

Fifty years ago, 9 out of 10 Aussies described themselves as Christian. Today, it's only 5 out of 10.¹

How do we cross that cultural divide? Do we expect people to cross the gap and turn up in church? Or are we to cross the gap and take the good news about Jesus to them?

Which commission did Jesus give: "Ask them to come" or "Go"?

Alan Hirsch challenges us to do the cross-cultural work:

... it is *we* who are the "sent" people of God, and whatever that means to our identity as God's people, it must also sometimes mean *we* must *go* to where the people are. If we fail to "go" to the people, then to encounter the gospel meaningfully they must "come." This is the inbuilt assumption of the attractional church; and it requires that the nonbeliever do all the cross-cultural work to find Jesus, and not us! Make no mistake: for many people, coming to church involves some serious cross-cultural work for them. They have to be the missionaries!²

Weekend services at Riverview are designed so that someone who is visiting for the first time will feel as comfortable as possible. Nevertheless, it's still an enormous cultural leap compared to the wider Australian culture. It has to be: it's the culture of a different kingdom. Our commission is cross-cultural: we're ambassadors who represent another kingdom.

Think about how God reached us. *He came to us*, incarnate in the person of Jesus. God took on human flesh and became one of us! Jesus was the ultimate cross-cultural missionary—from heaven to earth! He calls us to do the same: to incarnate the presence of God in our world: "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you" (Jn 20:21). To do this, we must understand our culture, and find the words to bridge the gap to the culture of Jesus' kingdom.

That's how ambassador Paul understood his role:

1 Corinthians 9:19-23 (*The Message*) Even though I am free of the demands and expectations of everyone, I have voluntarily become a servant to any and all in order to reach a wide range of people: religious, nonreligious, meticulous moralists, loose-living immoralists, the defeated, the demoralized—whoever. I didn't take on their

¹ 1966 census: 88%. 2016 census: 52%. <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-06-27/australians-are-older-ethnically-diverse-and-less-religious/8654440>

² Alan Hirsch, *Fast Forward to Mission: Frameworks for a Life of Impact* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2014).

way of life. I kept my bearings in Christ—but I entered their world and tried to experience things from their point of view. I've become just about every sort of servant there is in my attempts to lead those I meet into a God-saved life. I did all this because of the Message. I didn't just want to talk about it; I wanted to be *in* on it.

To communicate well, we must understand our culture.

Understanding our culture

Western culture has a “gospel” of its own: it calls people to be **your best self**, to fulfil your potential, to become all you can be. You see this message everywhere: Facebook, TV, women's magazines, self-help books, education curricula, parenting guides, ...

The values associated with this message are:

- **freedom**: be who you want to be. Make your own choices. Don't let anyone else define you or limit you.
- **tolerance**: accept others who are different from you. Let them be their true selves, without judging them.

Are these values good or bad? Are they the same things valued in Scripture, or are different?

Scripture certainly encourages people to be all they can be: all that God created us to be. Scripture emphasises people being free: that's what God did for Israel in Exodus. And Scripture emphasises loving acceptance of others: just look at the life of Jesus.

So, we're all good? The Bible says the same as our culture? Not really. In Scripture, God gave us astounding freedom but it is freedom within limits defined by God: all the trees in the garden except for one (Genesis 2:16-17). Similarly, we love people and value each one as of great worth, but we don't tolerate everything indiscriminately.

In practice, there are some things our culture doesn't tolerate, such as paedophiles, terrorists, people smugglers, and bigots. These “evil” people should not be free, but the rest of us are good and should be free to pursue our dreams as long as we aren't hurting anyone else.

But this worldview lacks the power to transform human society:

- The call to be my true self assumes the self is basically good. It doesn't take seriously enough the presence of evil in every human. Selfishness and self-interest aren't enough.
- Relationships are secondary. Everything comes back to what makes *me* happy. Since the goal is to be my authentic self, life is about me. Relationships are good if they make me happy, but if not, I move on. The gospel has a much deeper call for radical, selfless love.

- Tolerance is a cheap substitute for genuine love. Tolerance accepts everything without engaging with the other. The gospel calls for radical, selfless social engagement in constructing a loving society, rather than mere tolerance.
- The self-message doesn't genuinely engage with marginalised people who are excluded, starving, or oppressed (beyond a bit that makes me feel better about myself.)

The core clash between the gospel and our culture is the direction of life. Is life about me? Or is it about something beyond the self? There is no salvation in the self!

Eugene Peterson (translator of *The Message*) noted that the word *soul* has dropped out of common usage in our culture. It's been replaced by the word *self*. What's the difference?

Self is the soul minus God. Self is what is left of soul with all the transcendence and intimacy squeezed out, the self with little or no reference to God (transcendence) or others (intimacy).³

Our culture's false gospel is so pervasive: there's a huge danger of us being shaped by this, even in church. We are so immersed in this culture that we don't realise how we have compromised the gospel when we say things like, "Accept Jesus into your life. It will be so much better for you. It'll be better than you've ever known." We can't appeal to selfishness and claim to be presenting Jesus' gospel.

What doesn't work

McCrindle Research asked Aussies what turned them away from faith.

Want to know what response they got?

Just as there are attractions, there are aspects of religion and spirituality that act as repellents for non-Christians.

The top repellents (which somewhat or strongly repel) are:

1. Hearing from public figures and celebrities who are examples of that faith (75%)
2. Miraculous stories of people being healed or supernatural occurrences (65%)⁴

Aussies don't trust the kind of religion that turns faith into a TV show, with healing reports of people they don't actually know. Sorry Benny Hinn and co: no doubt some will contribute to your personal prosperity, but you're turning the wider population away from faith.

³ Peterson, Eugene, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places*, London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2005. 37.

⁴ https://mccrindle.worldsecuresystems.com/blog/2017/05/Faith%20and%20Belief%20in%20Australia%20Report_McCrindle_2017.pdf (McCrindle, 2017), 26.

So what attracts Aussies to faith? Here's what they told McCrindle:

The greatest attraction to investigating spirituality and religion is seeing people who live out a genuine faith. Second is experiencing a personal trauma or significant life change.⁵

We're all familiar with the second one: loss and trauma have a way of shaking us up so we're open to alternatives. But did the first one grab your attention? People who live their faith make it credible. Aussies are looking for authentic, embodied truth.

Communicating the gospel

Communication starts by listening (Gen 3:9). What does the person believe? What do they value? Invite people to share themselves.

God did not shout from heaven: he *came to us* in Jesus. Draw close to people; do life with them; find common ground.

Finding common ground

The human heart hungers for the good news—cravings that are unsatisfied any other way. These yearnings, deep within, are like echoes of a voice. Listen for them in conversations. Things like:⁶

- **Justice:** “It’s not fair!” People are aware that something is wrong with the world, that injustice needs to be set right. When people express anger at injustice, where does this awareness come from?
- **Spirituality:** People in every culture and era are aware of something “beyond.” Don’t criticise or fear people with new age beliefs: draw them towards what they crave (Acts 17:23).
- **Beauty:** Despite the ugliness of the damaged world, there is astounding beauty: sunsets and mountains, symphonies and bird songs, seasons and rainbows, creatures and creation. Where does this come from? Why do birds sing?
- **Love:** We are made to be connected, to be accepted, to belong. Solitary confinement drives people crazy. Despite alienation, rejection, betrayal and loneliness, people yearn for love. Love listens louder than words.

Don’t judge who’s “in” and who’s “out.” Nothing drives people away faster than acting like you are “saved” and they are “unsaved.” Jesus is Lord of the whole planet—whether people acknowledge him yet or not. He is their Lord and ours! Find the places where they are aware of God, and call them to discipleship under our King.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ This list is from Tom Wright, *Simply Christian*. London: SPCK, 2006.

You don't need to have all the answers. Just be honest: this is the great thing God is doing in his world, and we're always surprised how it works out anyway. **Your life** makes the message credible.

Pray that God will open their hearts to see the astounding thing he has achieved in Jesus (Ephesians 1:16-21). Trust the Holy Spirit to do this.

Expressing kingdom reality

As you journey with people, there will be times when you just know that God is doing something that will demonstrate Jesus is Lord. It could be releasing people from oppression or sickness. It can be praying for resources or reconciliation. It can be resolving injustice. It can be a word of wisdom—finding a way through an impossibility.

Let me give an example. Many years ago, I was walking by a table where two women were chatting. I overheard Julia describing how she needed an eye operation and the possible side effects really scared her. I wasn't part of the conversation, but I just had a sense that God wanted to show himself to her, so I stopped and said, "Sorry: I overheard what you were saying, and believe that God wants to heal your eye. Would you let me to pray for you?" She answered, "Pray if you want to, but I don't believe in that stuff." What do you do that point? The person has no faith, so can they be healed? After confirming she was really okay with prayer, I prayed for her. Several years later, I was visiting a church, and there was Julia! She told me her story: "When I went back to the doctor to schedule the operation, he said, 'I don't know what's happened, but you don't need that operation anymore.'" She was stunned! At that point in her life, she was running from God, and she told me she had also gone out of her way to avoid me too. But God had caught up with her, and here she was worshipping him.

That experience taught me so much, because it was outside the paradigm of how I expected God to work. Julia wasn't looking for God. She had no faith to be healed. This wasn't happening in a revival meeting. But this was God, showing himself to her anyway, making her aware of how much he cared about her. Expect God to do that!

The gifts of the Spirit are always an expression of love for the person — God's wise and just and caring reign of his world. You are the mouthpiece declaring what God is doing, and the Holy Spirit does it. It's scary, since only God's power can make it happen. That's why it's so powerful: the one who raised Jesus from the dead affirms he is running the world:

1 Cor 2:3-5 ³ I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, ⁴ and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of

the Spirit and of power,⁵ so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.

You hear God, declare it, and rely on God to perform it:

- That's how Moses delivered Israel from Pharaoh.
- It's how Jesus proclaimed the kingdom.
- It's how the disciples proclaimed the risen Lord in Acts.
- It's how Paul proclaimed the message in Corinth.
- It's how the Spirit gives witness to Jesus.

This must not collapse into triumphalism: we don't have a fully redeemed world yet. Our bodies are not yet redeemed, so Christians do experience persecution, sickness, aging, and death. In fact, we are called to identify with the world's pain, which drives us to prayer where God experiences that pain in us (Rom 8:17-26).

Nevertheless, there are times when God brings "the power of the age to come" forward into the present to demonstrate that Jesus really is Lord! Expect it. Pray for it. Work with God as he does it.

Conclusion

Jesus is Lord of heaven and earth, because God raised him from the dead. Based on the opening verses of the Book of Romans, Martin Luther summarised the gospel like this:

There you have it. The gospel is a story about Christ, God's and David's Son, who died and was raised and is established as Lord. This is the gospel in a nutshell.⁷

See the world as his! What can you do to bring justice and healing?

What is the Holy Spirit doing to confirm Jesus is Lord?

How can you connect with people's spiritual hunger?

⁷ *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*. Edited by Timothy F Lull et al, Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2005. III.11.

Memory Work

John 20:21 (NIV)

Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you."

Group Questions

1. Discuss the difference between asking people to *come* versus *going* to them. Do you think church culture is different from Australian culture in general? How do we take Jesus to people? What has worked for you?
2. In your experience, how does God reveal himself to people? Share stories of how God has shown up so people could know him. What can we learn from those experiences about being God's agents?

Take Home Exercise

How would you tell your story of encountering Jesus? What difference has he made in your life? Write down your story. Limit yourself to a single sheet of paper (two sides at most). You won't be able to tell everything that has happened in the years of your life, so this exercise will help you to focus on the difference God has made for you.

Here are three questions to help you shape your story:

1. Where have you come from? Did you start with a privileged background, like Nicodemus? Were you at the bottom of the barrel, like the Samaritan woman? How did human brokenness affect you?
2. How did you meet Jesus? Was it at an early age, through wonderfully caring parents? Was it at a time of desperation when you were beyond yourself? Was it an encounter with a person in whom you recognised God's love? Was it a convincing logical argument, or a desperate emotional craving, or seeing the reality in someone else? What convinced you to stop living for yourself and give yourself to the Lord Jesus?
3. What sustains you in your faith today? Would you describe your life as smooth sailing, a raging cyclone, or somewhere in between? What difference does belonging to God make in your every-day life?

Those three questions will help shape a beginning, a middle, and an ending for your story, but feel free to find other ways to tell the story of God at work in your life.

When you've written your story, you may never tell it exactly that way, but the exercise helps you to be ready to share your story when people ask you why you are doing life the way you do.