

Sharing the Gospel / COB / 07.26.15

- † It is always fun to preach while we are decorated for VBS! I hope you are excited, VBS starts tonight! I have been excited all week to catch glimpses of so many people working extra hours to get ready for this. Of course, it has been complete chaos so I cannot get any work done, but it always is nice to see the church bring some life into the building!
- I want to talk a little about VBS today, but I want to start with a little story. That's what they teach you in pastor school, you know, that you should begin sermons with a story.
- † Willow Creek pastor Bill Hybels was socializing with some non-believers on a large boat one day; probably a sailboat, since he loves to sail. Anyway, just as he was about to leave – I mean, he was on the ladder, getting off of the boat – a guy called out the question, “What does it mean to be a Christian?” Everyone was watching and listening, but Hybels knew he had at most forty-five seconds of their attention. What would you say, with less than a minute to explain Christianity?
- According to his book, *Becoming a Contagious Christian*, Hybels explained a version of “Do vs. Done.” How many of you have heard of that? Here's a short version: Most religions can be summarized with the word “do, D-O”: You are trying to do enough good things to please your god or to get to paradise. Christianity, on the other hand, is summarized with the word “done, D-O-N-E”: Christ has done everything for us, so we can be with God in Heaven even though we can never do enough to get there on our own.
 - Pretty slick, right? short, to the point, a contrast easy to explain and understand. I think Hybels chose well what to say, and he inspired me to use variations of this illustration many times.
 - Is this the gospel? No. Why not? It is missing some key components. So were Hybels and I were wrong to use this illustration? No: we used it as an introduction and a hook, sharing a vivid distinction of the gospel to provoke people to thought and hopefully to interest in hearing more.
 - When I talk with non-believers about Jesus, I sow seeds, gauge interest, and try to provoke interest, by offering something simple, clear, and non-threatening, like “Do vs. Done.” It's ok to share only some of the gospel truth, as long as what you share is truth.
- † Suppose someone asks how to become a Christian, and I say, “You have to pray for Jesus to forgive you of your sins.” What did I say that was incorrect? The Bible never says you have to pray to be saved, it says you have to believe.
- It is not wrong to have people pray when they first come to faith; I think it is good, because it reinforces the principles one more time and it emphasizes our dependence on God and his forgiveness and grace. But the Bible does not require prayer for salvation, it requires faith.
 - For example, **John 3.36 NET: The one who believes in the Son [of God] has eternal life.**
- † If someone asks how to become a Christian, and I say, “You have to believe in Jesus!” is that wrong? No. Is that a full gospel presentation? No. What does it mean to believe in Jesus? what are you to believe about Jesus? I might believe Jesus is Batman; that's not going to suffice. Even the scriptures that emphasize believing in Jesus have a broader context with more information.
- Let's look at the context of the verse we just read; open a Bible to John 3.35 [p.1200 in the pew Bibles]: **John 3.35-36 NET: The Father loves the Son and has placed all things under his**

authority. The one who believes in the Son has eternal life. The one who rejects the Son will not see life, but God's wrath remains on him.

- Part of saving faith is understanding who Jesus is as the Son of God, of the triune God with the Father; if that is part of saving faith, then that is something we have to share in the gospel! If you shared every other truth in the gospel, but did not identify Jesus as the divine Son of God, do you know what you would be sharing? The false gospel of the Jehovah's Witnesses!
 - This passage suggests we also have to explain something about Jesus' authority and his offer of eternal life, and the fact that without Jesus, God's wrath remains on us. If you ask someone to believe in Jesus but do not lead them to recognize their own need for salvation, can it be said that they came to faith in what Jesus offers them on the cross? No.
- † Even John 3.16 has a broader context that implies more than just a generic or unspecified belief; look at John 3.14 [p.1200 in the pew Bibles]: **John 3.14-19 NET: "Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life." For this is the way God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world should be saved through him. The one who believes in him is not condemned. The one who does not believe has been condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the one and only Son of God. Now this is the basis for judging: that the light has come into the world and people loved the darkness rather than the light, because their deeds were evil.**
- To believe in Jesus is to believe in the truth about him as the one and only Son of God, who also is the Son of Man, who had to be lifted up, which means crucified, in order to provide us eternal life, because without Jesus being crucified for us, we are condemned by God and will spiritually perish, since we loved the darkness and did evil deeds. So even John 3.16 – our most basic and default verse about salvation by faith – in context provides a lot of information to believe.
 - It is not wrong to summarize the gospel by saying something like "You have to believe in Jesus!" or by using "Do vs. Done," but we should not think we have shared the whole gospel.
- † There are times when you definitely want to share the whole gospel. When LeeAnn's grandmother was on her death bed, we flew to Indiana with the express purpose of sharing the gospel with her again. She was dying, so it would have been foolish to share anything less than the full gospel.
- When people want to become members of the church, the elders verify that they understand and believe all of gospel and the real gospel, since many false ones are being proclaimed.
- † But what about when I first met my neighbors on 2nd Avenue, when I moved here. Is that first meeting necessarily the best time to share the whole gospel? "Hi, my name is Will; do you know that you are a sinner headed for Hell? Sit yourself down there and I'll explain..." I mean, that might work for some people in some situations, but I wouldn't say it is a good default approach.
- So what do I do? I engage that person in conversation. I drop hints that I am a Christian. I say I pray for my neighbors or my church is having VBS this week or how God helped me through something like what my neighbor is enduring. I sow some seeds and try to spark some interest.
 - If my neighbor seems interested – or if a child at VBS this week seems interested – I might pursue the conversation. With an adult, I might ask, "Do you have a church background?" "Oh, your background is Roman Catholic, Jehovah's Witness, Mormon, Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist..."

that's so interesting! You know, there are some similarities in what the Bible teaches and what your church teaches, but one distinction is..." or "You know, there are some similarities in what the Bible teaches and what your church teaches, and one important similarity is..."

- † For example, I meet a lot of people with a Roman Catholic background. I tell them I have that background myself, and most of my family is lapsed Catholic, which usually makes them smile.
 - I say, "You know, the Roman Catholic Church and my Bible church share some beliefs; we both believe there is one God who is triune in nature: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, each unique in personality and action, but so unified in essence, character, and will that they are one God;
 - We both believe that Jesus was the divine Son of God who came from Heaven to be the human savior called Christ; and that Jesus died on the cross to pay the penalty for our sins and was resurrected on the third day.
 - But there is one important difference: the Roman Catholic Church agrees with us that you need the grace offered through Christ, but they say you also need to obey the sacraments, which includes confession and penance, and thus comes down to being good enough; we go by what the Bible teaches, that salvation is 100% by grace, a gift that is received 100% by faith alone.
 - In less than one minute, I can share all that information! It still is not a full gospel presentation, but I have done some real good here. I establish some commonality, which puts them at ease and peaks their interest; and if I can hold their attention, I explain some common principles, because sometimes even church people don't have a clear understanding.
 - Then I explain an important difference [which in this case is a version of "Do vs. Done," right?], because I want them to know the biblical gospel and I want them to think about the fact that there might be more they could experience and receive of God than what they have so far.

- † So, getting back to my earlier question: you should share the amount of information that the Spirit is guiding you to believe will be effective in that situation.
 - Sometimes that will be the whole gospel. Sometimes it will be less. If you encounter people who think they are good enough and don't need Jesus, you probably do not have a five minute window to present the whole gospel right away. But you might spark some interest.
 - You tell them without Jesus, getting into Heaven is like a baseball player who wants to get into the Hall of Fame, but the only way is to bat a perfect 1.000 and make zero errors in the field over his entire twenty year career. God's standard is like that, requiring us to perfectly do everything God wants and never step outside of the boundaries of his commands. It's impossible, right? That's why we need Jesus, because the Bible says if we accept his sacrifice on our behalf, then God attributes to us the perfect righteousness of Jesus.
 - In VBS, you might not have an opportunity to share the whole gospel, that's ok. But you should be prepared to share the whole gospel if a child or parent is that interested, and you should be comfortable helping a child or parent take a smaller step toward faith and understanding, by sharing some truth that is not the whole gospel.
 - If a child has a question, answer the question and see where it goes. The child might need to process the answer before absorbing more information. Follow up the next day to see what the child is thinking and whether there is interest in learning more.

- † To do any of this, you have to know the gospel. It's the most important aspect of our faith and of our mission! So let's see if we can think this through and help you remember what to share.
- What did John say was the point of his gospel book, anyone remember? Turn to John 20.30 [p.1227 in the pew Bibles]: **John 20.30-31 NET: Now Jesus performed many other miraculous signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are recorded so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.**
 - So the essence of the gospel is who Jesus is and how Jesus can give us spiritual life. You can remember that, can't you?
- † Now, to answer who is Jesus, we have to understand what it means that Jesus is the Christ and that Jesus is the Son of God. John took twenty pages to explain these things. Y'all should not get upset if you need to share one page of information.
- Can we accept in faith that Jesus is the Son of God without understanding a little bit about God being a trinity or triune in nature? I don't think so. Many people in churches would tell you they think Jesus is called the Son of God because he was born to a virgin by the Holy Spirit. That does not explain his divinity, that he is the eternal divine Son, and therefore they are relying on the Jehovah's Witness gospel, which leads people to Hell.
 - Can we accept in faith that Jesus is the Christ without knowing what the Christ was prophesied to be in the Old Testament? No, because then people think Christ is just a title or Jesus' last name. The Christ was the savior promised by God, who would come to be the Greater Moses prophet [Deuteronomy 18], who would be God's eternal High Priest [Psalm 110] and ultimate Davidic King [Psalm 2], and would deliver Israel from oppression [Jeremiah 23] and deliver people from Satan [Genesis 3] and deliver from sin through an atoning sacrifice [Isaiah 53].
 - At the least, we need to emphasize that Christ is the savior God has always promised would come. It also is important to explain that Jesus is both the divine Son of God and the human Christ [Messiah]-savior. John starts his twenty page gospel with that truth; see also Isaiah 9.
 - How does faith lead to having spiritual life? John explained that Jesus was crucified to pay for our sin, so when we believe, we are set free from God's wrath and given new spiritual life. So sharing the gospel is explaining who Jesus is and what he has done for us, but you have to expand on those ideas a bit.
- † What did Paul say about the gospel? He agreed with John.
- If you want to know what Paul taught about the gospel, you could read Romans 1-5. There is a shorter summary in 1 Corinthians 15, but be careful you don't stop reading at v.8. Paul was a passionate teacher, so sometimes in his letters, you get a sense of hyper brain activity.
 - I understand that. Just the other day, I upset Mark, when I got all excited to teach something, so I jumped out of my chair, started scribbling on the board, and was forcefully and passionately trying to make my point. My hair was waving all over the place.
 - Paul was like that, though every painting of him shows him with about as much hair as I have. In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul starts off clarifying the gospel, but then digresses to passionately counter a heresy in the Corinthians church, before returning to the gospel theme down around v.22.

- The essence of Paul's gospel is Jesus as the human Christ and the divine Son of God from Heaven, who defeated sin and death and offers us new and eternal spiritual life by grace through our faith, because he died for our sins as prophesied in the Old Testament, was buried, resurrected and then appeared to many before ascending to Heaven. He offers us salvation, purity and victory over sin, even immortality and resurrection from death, and he will reign over the Earth as God's king. All that is in 1 Corinthians 15.
 - As with John, this can be boiled down to who Jesus is and what he did for us, but we have to explain those concepts for them to make any sense.
- † It is helpful to think of a middle step, between all the information about Jesus you know from the Bible and the basic summary of explaining who he is and what he has done for us.
- Billy Graham developed a story approach, using the bridge diagram to make the gospel easy to present. This is my favorite method. We keep a version of the bridge diagram in the lobby.
 - Other people remember categories: who Jesus is, why I need him, what he did, what I must do.
 - Others develop a catechism, like our six questions approach: who is Jesus, why did he come, what did he do, why should I care, how can I accept the gift, what is my next step?
 - Someone who is ready to hear the whole gospel will listen for the five minutes it takes to explain it. The question is will you be ready to explain it? Please don't be deceived into thinking you are not capable. Every person in this room can practice enough to remember the bridge or four to six questions and a few aspects of each answer. Plus we have handouts to help you.
 - If you think I'm pushing you too hard, you're wrong. In the Great Commission, Jesus told his disciples to go make more disciples. **1 Peter 3.15 NET: ...always be ready to give an answer to anyone who asks about the hope you possess.**
 - Listen, I used to be in the same place. When LeeAnn and I first met, I was uncomfortable sharing the gospel or even discussing what it was. But I studied and practiced, then I started talking with lost people. I am sure I messed up a lot in those talks, but God used the study, practice, and experience to help me understand the gospel and learn how to share the whole gospel or individual pieces of it, depending on what is appropriate.
- † I am not being demanding of you because I am a bossy, autocratic, hardnosed, so and so. I might be all those things, but I am demanding of you because I want the best for you.
- We are talking about scriptural gospel truth, the very essence of our faith, of our religion;
 - we are talking about our purpose in life, our mission as a church, our effectiveness for Jesus;
 - we are talking about our own salvation and assurance of saving faith;
 - and we are talking about you being obedient and walking in the light with Christ and experiencing his work through you to bless others.
 - If I let you deceive yourself about your duty, your ability, or the content of your gospel, I would be a lousy pastor and a lousy friend. Y'all should be exhorting each other, holding each other accountable, and encouraging each other to become great at sharing the gospel! That's how a healthy church operates.
 - If you are struggling with fear, intimidation, or lack of knowledge, I can help you, just as someone helped me before. If your issue is apathy, I encourage you to pray about this, and

search the scriptures for why you are on this planet. I don't think Jesus is going to buy into any of our excuses.

- † Let's address a different problem. As we have said, it is ok to share gospel truth without sharing the whole gospel, but is it ok if I share less than the gospel and pretend it is the whole gospel? If I tell someone, "just believe Jesus died for your sins and you will be saved," what's the harm?
 - The harm is the same as if we shared the whole gospel and then coerced a false confession of faith. You are deceiving the other person into thinking they have believed in the gospel truth about Jesus and come to saving faith, when that is not really true. That person now is deceived about being a Christian and now will not be open to truly hearing the gospel, and will grow disillusioned with Christ when nothing changes in them.
 - So by all means share only as much truth as a child or a parent or a neighbor can handle or the situation suggests is appropriate, but don't mislead anyone into thinking they are considering the full gospel if they are not.

- † Let me point out another mistake. There are at least three reasons it is wrong to tell a child to ask Jesus into his/her heart. I know many of you were led to Christ this way initially and you have been trained to do the same, but it is a mistake and there are at least three reasons why; what are they?
 - First, this is completely non-scriptural; nowhere does scripture teach this as a way to salvation.
 - Second, it makes no theological sense. We need to believe in who Jesus is and what he has done for us, so that we can experience new spiritual life and a relationship with God as gifts from Jesus, so then we can be empowered by the Holy Spirit to experience miraculous transformation in character and lifestyle... and none of this has to do with asking Jesus into our heart, even if heart is a metaphor for soul or spirit.
 - Third, even if heart is a metaphor for life, it is a weak and vague metaphor, and young children are not intellectually yet equipped to interpret graphic language like metaphors as easily as adults. Child psychologists say that such "dumming down" of a concept actually makes it less likely children will accurately understand.
 - Please don't do this. Share with the children God's revelation! Share with them scriptural truth, not some unbiblical, manmade metaphor. God put his truth in scripture the way it has to be put; trust him in that, trust the Holy Spirit to interact with God's Word.

- † Let's avoid one more mistake: let's focus on truth and grace and faith, and avoid talking about repentance and lordship. We will have another sermon on this another day, because I don't think you want to sit here another half hour today, but trust me on this for now.
 - When the Bible talks about repenting as part of saving faith, it teaches we have to repent of our lack of faith, repent of thinking we are good enough, self-justifying, thinking we are without need for what God offers. We repent in this way by believing in the gospel.
 - Repenting of specific sins and making Jesus lord of our lives starts right after coming to saving faith. If we emphasize them as part of the gospel, we risk confusing the issue; we risk diluting the fact that salvation is totally unmerited, an act of grace. Share the truth about Jesus and what he offers, ask them to believe. True saving faith will lead to submission to Christ's lordship later.

- † One more illustration. What do you say to people who call themselves Christians, but show no fruit? They don't read the Bible don't pray regularly, don't go to church, don't really show any evidence of a relationship with Christ. Here's a version of another illustration from the *Becoming a Contagious Christian* class, by Hybels, Mittelberg, and Strobel...
- There was a man who was a circus tightrope acrobat. He strung a rope across Niagara Falls, and he walked across the rope, pushing a wheel barrow. The crowd went crazy, because he made it. Then he turned around and went back the other way, with the wheel barrow full of bricks. He hammed up a bit, going forward, backward, pushing with one hand, all sorts of tricks. Again, the crowd went crazy. One guy gushed, "You are the greatest! I totally believe in you! I believe you could go back and forth all day, pushing that wheelbarrow without falling!" The acrobat replied, "Get in." That's real faith, when you are willing to act on it, to live it out. Let's pray. . .