

YAMs

Summer Midweek 2010



The Gospel, The Culture and The Church:
a radical reformation



yams summer midweek 2010 | wednesdays @ 6 p.m.

Week Six:
Beyond 'Outreach': loving your neighbor (*really*)



covenant chapel

BEYOND 'OUTREACH':

This week we'll consider what it looks like to actually *love* our neighbor. As Christians, we may recognize and understand our calling to share the gospel with those who don't yet believe. This is an awesome start. But a major mistake we can make in sharing the gospel is to try to keep people at an arm's length away until they make a decision for Christ.

We do want to be bold with the gospel, but we must move beyond any concept of "outreach" we have that involves keeping people at a distance. We must learn to actually love our culture; to love our neighbor.

A few questions to help get you thinking about this topic:

- When you think of the word "outreach" what comes to mind?
- What are some of the most effective outreach models you've seen used? Why were they so effective?
- What are some of the most ineffective outreach models you've seen used? Why were they so ineffective?

A few years ago, I had the opportunity to wrestle with this topic more than I ever had before. At an annual ministry conference, two different speakers spoke about outreach and evangelism in the same day. What this ministry didn't know was that the two speakers had completely opposite philosophies of evangelism and contradicted each other about the proper methods and strategies to use.

One believed you should present the gospel to complete strangers and be able to invite them to accept Jesus within several minutes. The other believed you should earn the right to speak with good friends and only then share the gospel.

Even though this conference unintentionally put these speakers together, I would set up something like this intentionally if I ever had the chance. The conflict and confrontation of philosophies was fantastic because it actually made you think about the best approach to outreach and evangelism.

The views of these speakers outline two broad models of Outreach:

- The presentation model
- The relationship model

The presentation model seeks to share the gospel as quickly and directly as possible and ask the hearer(s) for a decision. The relationship model focuses on building relationships and waits to earn the right to be heard. Each model has positives and negatives, and each looks to Biblical examples as precedents.

So what should we do with these? Is there a time to use each? Is there a way to combine the positives of each model without bringing the negatives along?

PRESENTATION EVANGELISM

Let's start by looking at the presentation model and trying to extract the positives we should use in evangelism:

First, there are two common types of presentation evangelism:

- Speaker to a large audience and a moment to make a decision at the end
- Christians sent out to ask compelling questions that lead toward Christ

With both, the emphasis is usually placed on making a decision quickly, those who indicate they want to begin a relationship with Christ are considered Christians (whether they actually are or not is probably unknown) and told or helped to assimilate into a church. In reality, they will probably struggle to assimilate into a church unless they already have relationships with Christians in the Church.

These types of presentation evangelism still do work in certain contexts, but more and more they are having little to no to negative effects in the United States. Why?

- **People are skeptical** – everyone is selling something and no one wants to buy it. So no matter how well-thought, compelling, or otherwise, canned sales pitches about Jesus rarely draw continued interest.
- **Everything is a cause** – cause marketing has become the norm in this country. Everything is a cause; everything is urgent and humanitarian. Therefore, motivational, emotionally-charged events lose their impact. And when they do the results rarely last because they are rooted first in emotion and not in truth.

RELATIONSHIP EVANGELISM

So what about the relationship model? It is a great idea to build relationships with the intention of sharing the gospel. The main difficulty with the relationship model is that you can delay sharing the gospel with people endlessly. As great as your relationship might be, only the gospel transforms people.

So while we should not keep people at an arm's distance, we also should not try to replace the transforming power of Jesus with our own friendship. The gospel should be shared early, but in a way where the person knows the relationship isn't contingent upon their decision.

PARTICIPATION EVANGELISM: A SOLUTION?

In *Radical Reformation*, Mark Driscoll suggests "participation" evangelism as an alternative to presentation or relationship evangelism:

Presentation Evangelism	Participation Evangelism
1. Gospel information is presented	1. A genuine, spiritual friendship between a Christian and non-Christian is built
2. Hearers are called to make a decision about Jesus.	2. The non-Christian sees authentic faith and ministry lived openly and participates in it.
3. If an affirmative decision is made, the person is welcomed into the church.	3. The gospel is naturally present in word and deed within the friendship
4. Then friendship is extended to the person	4. The non-Christian's conversion to Jesus follows his or her conversion to Christian friendships and the church
5. The convert is trained for service in ministry by being separated from the culture	5. The church celebrates the conversion of their friend.

Often times, in our eagerness to see people come to Christ (a fantastic desire) we lead people to a decision moment as quickly as we can. And if they are not ready to accept it, that is the last they hear of us.

For a second, put yourself in the shoes of someone like that. A person invites you to something or walks up to you, you hear some ideas that may sound a little crazy, but may also intrigue you. Then, in a second, you're asked if you want in or not. You've always been taught to carefully think through things – especially important decisions – and you have a feeling that this decision may be an important one. So you don't want to rush. You say no. And the only time you ever hear from this person again, if ever, is when they come back and ask you if you're ready.

If that was your impression of Christianity and Christians, wouldn't that hinder your decision to become one?

So, Driscoll argues that, "The participation model is based on the awesome truth that the transformed lives of people in the church are both the *greatest argument for* and the *greatest explanation of* the gospel. So why would we ever try to get people isolated to present the gospel to them? Let them come and experience it from people God has transformed.

Practically, this means that simply inviting people to Church is NOT evangelism. It's a great thing to do, it's a great way to let people hear great teaching about Jesus and the Gospel, but it is not the ultimate goal. And church services should not be the "holding point" for non-Christians in the church.

I would suggest that within the context of Covenant Chapel and most churches today, small groups of believers are a fantastic place to invite non-Christians. Let them come and experience what it looks like for a group of Christians to interact, encourage and pray for one another, and study God's word together. As much as they'd like, let them ask questions, object, and wrestle with the truth of the gospel. .

You may ask, "Won't those questions hinder the growth of other people in the group?" Absolutely not, though it may be awkward at first. But being confronted with difficult questions and having to work through them will increase spiritual growth dramatically. As a group of believers you are actually living like missionaries by inviting those with questions to spend time with you.

How is this different than the relationship model? There are many similarities. But the main difference is that participation evangelism emphasizes the message of the gospel early in the relationship. **There is no waiting to earn the right to be heard.** Instead there is a genuine relationship where a non-Christian is invited to consider the gospel in close proximity with believers without being forced to make an immediate decision.

Phases in Christianity?

One reason I really like the participation approach is that it isn't so linear. It lets people experience life with Christians without forcing a decision. It doesn't keep people at arms length.

Sometimes it seems like there's an unwritten rule in Christianity where we try to separate people into categories and have separate ministries and classes dedicated to each. For example, there are many ministries and programs dedicated to reaching non-Christians. Once a profession of faith is made, these folks then move on to discipleship or spiritual formation ministries and programs.

There's nothing inherently wrong with that, but when we do outreach events or evangelism we often focus on the benefits of Christianity. And when we encounter new believers, we, with good intentions, get them set up with a lot of resources, classes and people designed to help them live the Christian life.

But in that environment, it's very easy to see how people could get the impression that following Christ is primarily about helping me instead of glorifying God. People are then supposedly growing in their relationship with Christ, but only thinking about what Jesus can do for them.

Until one day when they reach some level of "maturity" and they are taught that it's not about them, but about glorifying God. But everything they've encountered to that point has been geared toward them. So they spend the rest of their life unlearning all that they've been taught – and taught primarily by the implications of the church does.

In marketing they call this a “bait-and-switch” you think you’re signing up for one thing and then it turns out to be something completely different. And it explains a lot – why are there so many superficial Christians? Why don’t people serve and tithe in the church? Why is evangelism and outreach so difficult for people to do? Well I’ve rarely heard an evangelistic presentation about how much Jesus demands of people who would follow him. Most people enter Christianity without any clue what they’re getting into.

So what’s the alternative? We must teach people from the start that Christianity is about glorifying God first and foremost. And it’s very difficult to do that from the presentation method where a quick decision is emphasized. And it’s very difficult to do when the gospel is only shared after months or years of friendship. People need to see the go modeled and taught from the get-go without being forced to sign on the dotted line.

If this life is being modeled and lived out, where people are being invited to see and participate in it, then when they come to Christ, they immediately begin living that kind of life, inviting others to come, see and participate.

It doesn’t have to be linear. We don’t have to have a linear process of evangelism, then discipleship, then service and outreach. It may seem that way because it has been set up that way for so long. But by blurring those lines through a participation approach, we can avoid the bait-and-switch.

So, in my opinion, here are the two best environments for effective evangelism and outreach:

- One-on-one conversations where both sides listen and share
- Small-group contexts where open, honest discussion is emphasized

Having said that, you most likely will never have non-Christian people from our culture engage you and ask you to sit down and talk about faith or to join their small group from their Muslim, Mormon or Atheist organization.

So in today’s culture, we have to really love our neighbor. Not just say we do, pass them a tract, and let them continue on with their lives. We have to love others enough to boldly take the initiative to dive headfirst into our culture and meet people on their turf.

Repent of our self-righteousness

To do that, we must first admit that we all have self-righteousness – and especially toward particular groups or people. I know that I am self-righteous, as illustrated in my opinions:

- I don’t like Jared from Subway because by losing weight he should have lost anyway, he doesn’t have to work a day in his life ever again.

- I don't like Dallas Cowboys fans who refer to them as "America's team" – especially when I know they only like the Cowboys because of their dominance in the 90s. Same goes for Yankees fans.
- I don't like musicians who get their start on the Disney Channel. Which means it's getting more and more difficult to listen to music these days.
- I don't like Joel Osteen because I think he preaches a weak gospel confuses the heck out of people. Same applies for any health, wealth, and prosperity preacher.

Now, whether or not I have "good" reasons for not liking these people, the truth is that I'm self-righteous towards them. I easily can get to thinking that I'm better than them.

And this same self-righteous attitude often presents itself toward non-Christians in our culture. If we're honest, we'll admit that we look at people in our culture and compare ourselves to them and conclude we're better.

Self-righteousness like that kills our missionary goal. With a self-righteous attitude we will do one of two things:

- **Ignore lost, hurting people:** the "culture be damned" approach. I'm fine, and I don't care about you.
- **Share with the wrong motivation:** the "you need the gospel" approach. (forgetting that we too need the gospel every day of our lives)

We have to destroy self-righteousness. The following passages provide great Biblical truths and examples. Take a few moments to read these and consider why self-righteousness is so damaging:

- Romans 3:9-11
- The Pharisee and the Tax Collector – Luke 18:9-14
- Jonah – Jonah 3-4

As long as we fail to repent of our self-righteousness, we'll continue to speak of evangelism in terms of "outreach," which has an implication that we reach out to people but not embrace them, instead keeping them at arm's length until they decide to make a decision for Christ.

Go Into the Culture

As we continually repent of our self-righteousness, we must then go into the culture. Lost, broken people probably won't spend their time and energy and money in all the same places we do. And if you're like me, it's very easy to fill your life with Christian and church activities.

So we must be intentional. And we have to avoid the self-righteous thought that, by going into the culture we will somehow become "dirty" or "infected." Jesus

came not for the healthy, but the sick. His light shines in the darkness. This is our calling as well.

Now we still must strive for holiness in our lives. We must continue to follow Jesus as we engage people of our culture on their turf. The following is a great guide to consider when determining how to engage our culture:

Biblical Principles for Cultural Decision Making:

- Can I do this in a way that glorifies God (1 Cor. 10:31-33)
- Am I following the example of Jesus Christ to help save sinners? (1 Cor. 10:33-11:1)
- Is it beneficial to the gospel and to me personally? (1 Cor. 6:12)
- Will I lose self-control and be mastered by what I participate in? (1 Cor. 6:12)
- Will I be doing this in the presence of someone who I know will fall into sin as a result? (1 Cor. 8:9-10)
- Is it a violation of the laws of my city, state, or nation? (Rom. 13:1-7)
- If I fail to do this, will I lose opportunities to share the gospel? (1 Cor. 10:27-30)
- Can I do this with a clear conscience? (Acts 24:16)
- Will this cause me to sin by feeding sinful desires? (Rom. 13:13-14)
- Am I convinced that this is what God desires for me to do? (Rom. 13:5)
- Does my participation proceed from my faith in Jesus Christ? (Rom. 14:23)
- Am I doing this to help other people, or am I just being selfish? (1 Cor. 10:24)

Conclusion: Be bold with the truth of the gospel.

Just because forcing people to make a decision immediately is not a good idea, doesn't mean we are to be ashamed of the gospel. We must speak it clearly, early and often. Just do it in the right context where it's not a one-and-done deal.

Too often we use relationship evangelism as an excuse not to be bold. That's equally as bad as forcing an immediate decision. In reality, it's worse because then you're never asking people to consider Christ. If we really love others, that means we want the best for them. We know that's Christ, and therefore to really love our neighbor, we must share the gospel with them.

Next time: Excuses – how Satan tries to keep us from our mission

When we meet again, we'll consider various excuses we use to avoid being missionaries to our culture. Again, there's a lot of potential excuses. We'll take some time to consider what the Bible says about a few of them.