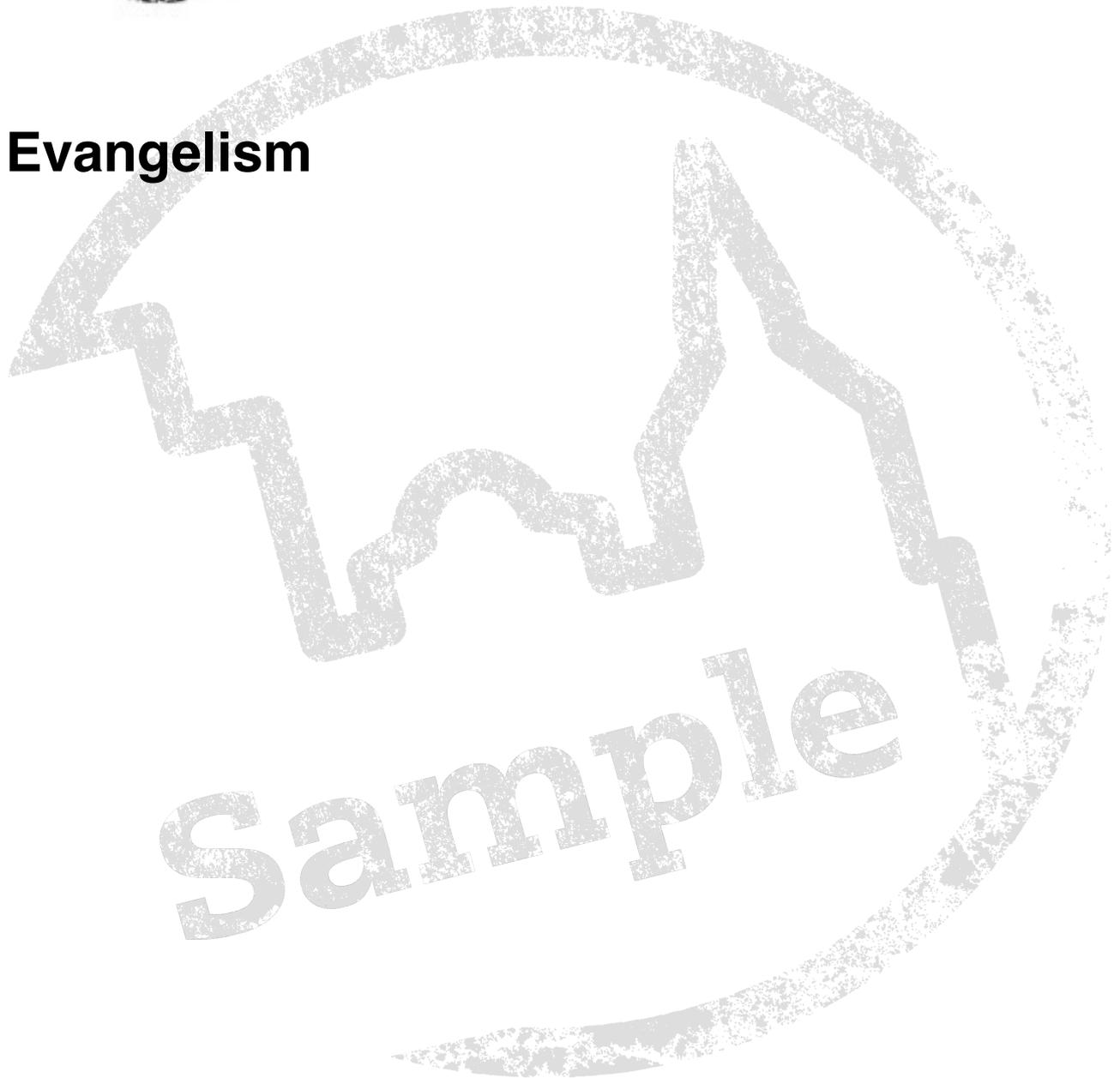




Evangelism



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Unit 4. Talking about God

Introduction

This unit aims to deal with how we bring up the topic of God in conversation and how we embrace the subject in our culture. We will do a brief cultural overview in order to address some of the cultural difficulties in talking about God in the West, and we will then go on to consider the biblical solutions to our problems.

Salespeople

We have all experienced conversations where someone is trying to sell us something, or we are being spoken at as opposed to being spoken to. Someone once came into my house and we sat down and chatted. Halfway through I realised, “This conversation isn’t about me; this is about you! This is about what you want!” It gathers momentum and then you realise that the person’s motive is their own success, although they spin it as if it is about you.

When it comes to talking about God, the real risk is that we come across like awkward salespeople. We end up sounding a bit clunky and forced. People are living in a culture where they are already very suspicious of being sold something: they are often approached by salespeople in the street, and being enticed to buy into all sorts of things. If we ever do talk to people about Jesus, we often come away thinking, “That sounded a little bit awkward.” In the 1990s British TV comedy series *The Fast Show*, there are some classic sketches which illustrate the point that non-Christians are aware of evangelistic workers. One of them involves a conversation at a loud party. One man walks over to the other, who says, “It’s a bit loud!” “What?” He repeats, “It’s a bit loud!” “Yeah — makes your ears bleed!” There is a pause, and then the first person says: “That’ll be like the blood that Jesus shed on the cross for our sins!” You can see the other person realising just what is going on, and then walk away.

This is the sort of ‘clunky’ thing that happens when we do not think about how we are bringing up the subject of Christianity. We do things like that and, not surprisingly, people on the receiving end walk away.

On the few occasions when a real opportunity comes up, we summon up the courage and we figure out what to say — but then it often ends up being a real let-down. People often do not know what to do with the topic. The awkwardness can happen in any relationship, even with those we know very well.

We know that talking about God and sharing the good news of Jesus is integral to us as Christians. We have a missionary God, and he calls us to be a missionary people. So often, though, we experience guilt for not going out there and gossiping the gospel, or we go out there and become, not fools, but idiots for Christ.

Reflection

1. When have you experienced the evangelism 'clunk'?
2. How did you feel afterwards?
3. How did the person you were talking to respond?
4. Why do you think it happened?

The state of our culture

A post-Christian culture

We need to recognise that we live in a culture which has lost the language of Christianity. I realised this one day as I was coming out of a bread shop on a Sunday. I had a little loaf tucked under my arm ready for our Sunday meal of soup. It was a quirky bread shop: a convenience store that advertises itself as selling "the bread my granddad used to make." There was a poster on the side saying, "Bakers Delight is open on Sundays. (Whatever happened to the day of rest?)" I remember walking on and wondering, "Yes, what did happen to the day of rest?" I remember it from when I was a child; it was built into our psyche that Sunday was a day you set aside.

It was a statement that showed just how much life has changed: our culture has shifted. There is no going back to those old days: things have moved on. Prayer in school has gradually slipped away from our culture. The last vestiges of Christendom are fading away. This means that we find ourselves with a great deal of Christian language in our vocabulary, but without the ability to communicate the message effectively to people. We live in a post-Christian culture, and so increasingly people simply do not understand what we are talking about.

Loss of common narrative

In the UK, it used to be that the God that people would not worship was the Christian God. If they were not going to believe in God, it was the Christian one they would be rejecting. But that is no longer the case. The word 'god' is simply depleted of meaning, people pour their own meaning into it. 'God' today is whatever you conceive him, her or it to be. If people did not go to church 60-80 years ago, they would at least admit to being 'sinners' in choosing that way of life. They understood the terminology on which Christianity is based.

Our starting ground for conversations with people is therefore much further back than it was 60 years ago. There are still people who walk around towns and cities with signs that read, "The end is nigh — repent." 60 years ago, people would have understood what they meant. Now things are different. This is not to denigrate their zeal, nor question their desire to see others turn to Christ, but the vast majority of people no longer know what this "end" is, let alone what it means to "repent". The whole terminology of Christianity needs to be re-explained to people.

That being the case, we must ask ourselves whether our Christian culture has caught up with this reality, or whether in fact we are giving the answers to questions that no one is

asking. We may have a range of evangelistic tools at our disposal, but we do not seem to know how to make them link with where people are today.

Reflection

1. What evidence do you see around you that we are living in a post-Christian culture? In what ways have you experienced a shift in culture over your lifetime?
2. What challenges and opportunities does this present us with as messengers of the gospel?

A privatised spirituality

The other issue today is that spirituality has become a very private thing. Even when Christians are geared up to have gospel conversations, they find that those with whom they are talking shut down conversations very quickly. We live in a world where people have a sacred-spiritual divide in their minds. The more the secular world has taken hold of our culture, the more science has pushed spirituality out of the market. While spirituality is making a come-back, it is still a very private thing. Each person's spirituality is up to each person, so the story goes, and so you must be careful what you say. Christianity used to be central in this market place, it used to have a right to be heard; it no longer does. We cannot assume that we have a voice any more.

There is also a break between morality and spirituality. The new spiritualities of today have less to do with moral living than with power and will. For example, newspapers often carry features on ethical living, where the focus is almost entirely ecological. Ethical moral living, in our culture, has nothing to do with what we do with our bodies — unless it affects the environment. Our very understanding of ethics is being modified.

Disconnected relationships

In 2004 there were 7 million people living alone in Britain — nearly four times as many as in 1961. By 2021, 37% of all households in Britain are expected to be made up of people who live alone.³

You can live alone very easily in the West. The reason we are not having conversations with people all the time is because we are becoming more and more isolated. There is a book by Robert Putnam called *Bowling Alone*.⁴ More people in the States are going bowling alone than ever before. They do not join leagues, but instead arrive with six or seven other strangers to play a competition together. They do not talk to them because big TV screens provide entertainment between frames: there is no need to engage with others. It is an indictment of our culture. We are forever finding new ways to be privatised. There was a case in London of a woman's body that was not discovered in her apartment

³ Turner, A. 'Living Alone' in *The Sunday Times*, 2nd September 2007

⁴ Putnam, R. *Bowling Alone*, (Simon & Schuster, 2000)

until over two years after her death.⁵ It can only be assumed that she lived such an isolated life that her death went unnoticed.

Work and home are disconnected and often seen as completely different spheres. Geographically people often work a long way from where they live. Many like to maintain a watertight barrier between their work and home activities. For Christians, it can be very difficult to connect relationships made at work with people from home.

The state of our Christian culture

Subculture versus counter-culture

A tendency for Christians can be to move from being counter-cultural to creating a Christian subculture, disconnected from the culture we live in and yet subtly influenced by it. This is what has happened in the West. Poor Bible teaching has reduced the Bible to a list of principles by which to live: we are not engaging the culture by telling people the story of the Bible and helping people to see how they fit into it. Mirroring our culture, we have reduced our relationship with God to a pietistic, privatised spirituality that has nothing to say to engage those around us. Just like the world we live in, relationships within churches are often disconnected, making Christianity into a one-on-one direct-line experience between the individual and God. Churches often resemble the self-interested clubs of the world around them, which people join in order to service their personal, individualistic needs. As communities of God's people, we need desperately to rediscover what it means to engage the culture in which we live. We need to know its stories and to speak its language, while living counter-cultural lives and telling a counter-cultural story that point to something better: the gracious, in-breaking rule of King Jesus.

What the Bible says

The encouragement from Scripture is that none of this has taken God by surprise. In fact Scripture deals explicitly with the issue of living as a people among a people, and what that means for our life and witness to God.

A people among a people

In Deuteronomy 4:5-8, Moses says this to the people of Israel:

See, I have taught you statutes and rules, as the Lord my God commanded me, that you should do them in the land that you are entering to take possession of it. Keep them and do them, for that will be your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.' For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as the Lord our God is to us, whenever we call upon him?

Israel were to be a people living among a people. As they lived counter-cultural lives visible to those around them, so the nations would see the truth about the great God who had given them such good laws and who lived among them. They would be seen to be a "wise and understanding people".

⁵ "Woman's body in bedsit for years", <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/london/4906992.stm>

How striking, then, that the apostle Peter, writing to churches spread throughout the Roman Empire, takes up the Old Testament language of living as God's people among the nations and applies it to the church. 1 Peter 2:9-12 says,

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.

The Bible calls us not so much to be witnessing but to be witnesses to something. Our lives are meant to witness – to testify, to give evidence – to what God has done. Your life as a community is to witness to the culture around you what it means to be the people of God. But it will only do that if people actually see and experience this community life in action. We are to be a people among a people, living visible, counter-cultural lives before a watching world.

An exiled people

In chapters 1 and 10 of Ezekiel, the Israelites learn through the prophet's visions that the glory of the LORD has left the temple in Jerusalem. They are a people in exile. And yet God has not been defeated, and his people have not been abandoned: his glory now rests with his people in Babylon. This is now the place where they are to live and to thrive as God's people. Thus in Jeremiah 29:7 the people of God, who are in exile in Babylon, are told to "seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare." Even though the people are in exile, God is there with them: that is where they are to live and prosper and do good as the people of God.

Again in 1 Peter, the great apostle takes imagery of the Old Testament people of God in exile and transfers it to the church. At the beginning of his letter, Peter describes the Christians he is writing to as "elect exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia," (1 Peter 1:1). The church is now God's chosen people scattered throughout the world, just like the Old Testament people of God were in exile. In the passage in chapter 2 quoted above, he says that they are to "Keep your conduct among the Gentiles [literally "the nations"] honourable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation," (verse 12). As they live as God's people in exile among the nations, the good life they live as a community is to be a witness to the reality of God to those around them.

The response, however, will be mixed. Peter says that there will be two reactions to this kind of community life lived among the nations:

Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good? But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but in your hearts honour Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defence to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do

it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behaviour in Christ may be put to shame.(1 Peter 3:13-16)

The first kind of response will be to belittle you for being a Christian: to make you suffer “for righteousness’ sake” and to slander you. We will end up suffering just like our King suffered. The other kind of response, however — the response for which we must pray — will be for people to see the hope that you have. They will see this through your community life of love and good deeds, even under persecution, and they will ask questions about the source of that hope. Your communal life will provoke questions among those around you.

An observed people

Daniel was one of the exiles living in Babylon. In Daniel 6:1-5, we are told that:

It pleased Darius to set over the kingdom 120 satraps, to be throughout the whole kingdom; and over them three high officials, of whom Daniel was one, to whom these satraps should give account, so that the king might suffer no loss. Then this Daniel became distinguished above all the other high officials and satraps, because an excellent spirit was in him. And the king planned to set him over the whole kingdom. Then the high officials and the satraps sought to find a ground for complaint against Daniel with regard to the kingdom, but they could find no ground for complaint or any fault, because he was faithful, and no error or fault was found in him. Then these men said, “We shall not find any ground for complaint against this Daniel unless we find it in connection with the law of his God.”

The context of Daniel is that the people of God had failed to be faithful. As a result, their land was overrun and they were sent into exile. Far from being a people who provoked questions, they became indistinguishable from the nations around them. Indeed, as the nations observed Israel, she became a laughing stock and an object of scorn to their enemies. Daniel’s life in exile was different: it was everything that the life of the people of Israel should have been. His faithfulness and the spirit in him distinguished him from all those around him, so that those who observed him could find no fault in him. His very life mirrored the God he served. Some were provoked to honour him, and later to honour his God. Others were provoked to despise him.

Peter says that we, as God’s New Testament people, are also to be an observed people. We are to live our lives as God’s people “among the pagans” — lives which they will see. The question is whether our lives will simply be indistinguishable from those around us (like those of God’s people living in the land), or whether (like Daniel’s) ours will be the kind of lives that provoke people either to ask questions about the hope that is in us, or to despise us because of what our lives reveal.

Reflection

1. When has the life of your church or small group provoked questions in those around you?
2. When has it led to hostility from those around you?
3. If you cannot think of any examples of this happening, why do you think that is?

How to put God centre stage

Recognise worldviews

Everyone has a worldview, but most people do not recognise that they do. The system in which they are living simply confirms their worldview and so it is a given. People need questioning as to why they believe what they believe. However, we must also be humble enough to admit that we also have a worldview. This is a great place to start with people. You can find out how they see the world and why they view it in the way that they do, but you also have a genuine opportunity to help them explore your worldview and why you believe the way you do. Thus begins a conversation about the Bible's great narrative of history from creation to new creation, as we engage with other people's narratives about their lives.

'Water-cooler' Christianity

A 'water-cooler' TV programme is a show that people talk about around the water-cooler at work. However trivial the shows may be, these kinds of TV programmes are excellent ways of engaging with people on issues of life, death, relationships, values and so on. They also change on an almost weekly basis, giving us on-going, new opportunities. We need to see these as 'gifts' to facilitate our connecting with people. We need to be reading, watching and critiquing our culture so that we can engage with people. We need to get under the skin of the books and films that people are watching. Every story ever told is about characters, problems and ways of redemption. We live in a world that loves narratives. We need to listen to the stories people are telling and engage with the stories they hear, so that we can show how God's great story of redemption intersects with, and reshapes, the stories of our culture. We need to introduce people into our network of Christian relationships so that we can model and show how this alternative story shapes and recreates an alternative community. The Culture module will help equip us to do this thoughtfully and relevantly in a gospel-centred way.

Reflection

1. Have you ever had good conversations about the gospel with friends off the back of a TV programme? What happened?
2. What TV programmes do people around you watch?
3. What points of contact with the gospel might there be in those programmes? What issues about life and relationships do they throw up? According to those programmes, what are the problems with the world and what are the solutions?

Loving Jesus

We will look in the next unit at ways of presenting the gospel. A word of warning as we do this, however. The principal reason we do not talk about Jesus as we should is not a lack of evangelistic tools or a lack of knowledge. As we saw in Unit 2, the reason we do not talk about Jesus enough is ultimately because we do not love him enough: our hearts are distracted and enticed by other things, and cold to our Saviour. A heart that is captivated by Jesus will talk freely about him, like a fountain overflowing. After all, we talk about the ones we love and those that are dear to our heart. If we want to be effective in evangelism, then our hearts need to be full of Jesus. Why not pray the following as the apostle Paul does for yourself and for those around you?

So that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen. (Ephesians 3:17-21)