

Epiphany: Good News for All People

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 06 January 2019

Preacher: Rev. Thomas Hinson

[0 : 00] That's the theme of epiphany, the idea that the gospel is able to cross cultural boundaries. And we see in this story that God's desire is that the gospel would cross cultural boundaries, right? And yet as we say that, as we begin to talk about evangelism, sharing the gospel with people who haven't heard about Jesus, I think if we're totally honest, people, probably most of the people in this room, younger Christians especially, we kind of wince when we hear that. You know, wince at the idea of sharing faith and trying to convert other people to our faith. That's kind of a, it's a very taboo thing to do in this culture. It's one of the great sins that we can commit is to try to convert somebody. You know, Barna did research on this and they found that if you try to convert somebody else to your belief system, your worldview, 60% of Americans would consider you to be a religious extremist, which is not a good label to have in our culture. And so the majority of people out there, you know, a lot of Christians included, feel very negatively about evangelism.

And then you take that a step further when you begin to talk about cross cultural evangelism. Because a lot of times when that comes up, we immediately think of the horror stories in history, a number of which are true, very true, where people confused evangelism with cultural imperialism. And right, if you're anything like me, you begin to get a mental image of men in pith helmets, sort of robbing indigenous people of their land and their resources and forcing them to adopt not only Western religion, but Western clothing and Western lifestyle and Western values and Western language. And these are horror stories. And nobody wants to be a part of that. And so we think, particularly as younger Christians, that we've come to a place where we've sort of seen through that. We feel very cynical about it. We certainly don't want to ever repeat it. And so when it comes to the idea of evangelism, most of us sort of shy away from that.

It's just not done anymore. Let people believe what they believe. I'll believe what I believe and you believe what you believe. So I think that there is this sense that we all feel discomfort with it.

[2 : 22] And yet when you read the story of the Magi, there is one point being made very loudly and clearly in this passage. And that point, the central point of the story, is that God desires for all the nations to hear the good news of Jesus. That God's heart is that every man, woman, and child would come to recognize the truth of Jesus Christ. And you know, I'm married to my wife, Laura, and I love Laura. And because I love Laura, I love the things that she loves. And I prioritize the things that she prioritizes.

It's part of what it means to love her and to be committed to her. And in the same way, those of us who are here who love the Lord, part of what it means to love God is to love the things that God loves and to care about those things. And this is telling us that God cares about the gospel going to the nations.

So how do we reconcile that internal tension we feel over evangelism? Is it all cultural imperialism? Are we forcing our beliefs on other people? Should we not avoid that at all costs? That thing, how do we hold that together with this very clear sense that God's desire is for the gospel to spread around the world? I think the story of the Magi helps us begin to reconcile these things a bit.

So we're going to focus in on Matthew 2. We're going to look specifically at the Magi and the star and how they come to faith in Jesus. In years past, we've talked about Herod and things like that. We've gone into more detail there. Tonight, we're really just going to focus on the Magi and this looming question.

And we're going to trust that the Lord's going to speak through His Word. So let's pray, and then we'll open His Word together. Lord, we thank You for Your Word, and we thank You that we can come to You with questions and uncertainties and doubts, and we can come with the hope that You're able and willing and that You do speak through Your Word to us. And so we know that that's our hope this evening, not the wisdom of human beings, but rather that You would be the God who

speaks, as You always have been. We pray that You would do it again in Your Son's name. Amen. [4 : 31] So let's look at the Magi and just get a little context on who these individuals are. You know, the story or the song, We Three Kings of Orient Are, is more or less sort of wrong on every count.

You know, they're probably not kings. We have no idea how many there were. There could have been a dozen, we dozen kings. But, you know, three, I think, has been the traditional understanding. But we really don't, we're not told how many there are. They're probably not kings, most likely not kings.

And I wouldn't really say they're from the Orient. We don't really say anybody's from the Orient anymore. We, they're from a region, what was formerly, probably the former site of Babylon, which is in modern-day Iraq. So this is probably where they're from. Simply put, the Magi are very highly educated religious scientists. They don't have the post-Enlightenment hang-ups about faith and science that some of us do. They're religious, they're very religious, and they're scientists. And for them, that is one and the same. And they're into a lot of different things. These are very learned men. They are very, very knowledgeable, very widely read. And one of their major points of focus was astrology. Astrology, the idea that you can observe the movements and the behavior of the heavenly bodies. And if you're observing these things and interpreting the signs in the sky, you can discern all kinds of things about the world, about the activity of the gods, about the future. And so they paid a lot of attention to the sky. And then the other thing that we realize from this passage about the Magi is they're very knowledgeable about the Jewish scriptures. These are not Jews, and yet they're very well read in the Old Testament scriptures. And we ask, well, how could that be? Well, hundreds of years, roughly 600 years before this account takes place, Israel had been taken into captivity in Babylon. You read about this in places like the book of Daniel. And Daniel had been taken into Babylon against his will in exile. And then the plan was that Daniel would be trained as a Magi. So he's actually taught and trained and learns how to be a Magi. And then what you have there is the kind of cultural exchange happening at Babylon University, where Daniel is learning how to be a Magi in Babylon. And he's also introducing the other Magi to the Hebrew texts. And so from that point forward, you have this influence, not only of Babylon on Israel, but an influence from Israel on Babylon.

And those scriptures became incorporated into the library of the Magi. So this is the setup. This is how we're to understand these people. And we don't really know much beyond that about them. So we have the Magi. The other detail that we need to understand a little bit more about is the star. [7 : 37] Right? We have these Middle Eastern religious scientists, and they know the scriptures. And then there's some kind of major celestial event, which if you're paying attention to the stars and looking for signs, this would have been a big one. Big new bright star appears. So there's a lot of theories about what this could have been. I think one of the more prominent, more plausible theories is in fact that it was not a star. That it was more likely a planetary conjunction.

We know there's a cuneiform inscription from the observatory of Sippar in Babylonia that tells us that right at this time, right around the time when this would have been, there was actually a planetary conjunction between Jupiter and Saturn. Now I've never seen that happen. It happened again in Kepler's day. And according to Kepler's writings, this is a pretty amazing thing to witness. Very bright, very hard to miss. It looks like a new bright star appears in the sky. And we know this happened right around this time. And it also happened within the constellation known as Pisces. Right? If you're into astrology and you believe that the different constellations have meaning and significance, then you would note that this conjunction appeared within Pisces. And so if you're one of the magi, if we can kind of get ourselves into their mindset, and you see this happening in the sky, here's probably what you would have thought. You would think, well, Pisces represents the end of an old age and the beginning of a new age. It's the end of a solar cycle. So you would think, okay, something is ending and something else is beginning. And then if you looked at Jupiter, Jupiter was the royal planet. It was associated with royalty and sovereignty. And then Saturn had long been associated with the nation of Israel, symbol for Israel. So if you're the magi and you're observing the celestial event and you're reading the scriptures, you would have said to yourself, well, it seems as though the heavens are telling us that a new age is beginning when the seat of royal sovereign power in the world is going to shift to Judea. Right? So it's pointing them in that direction.

Then they would go to the scriptures and say, are there anything in the Jewish scriptures that would help us understand a little more? And then they came across Micah 5, 2, which is quoted in Matthew. And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah. For from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel. They would have said, okay, aha, we need to go. A new king, a new ruler of some kind is being born in Judea. Right? And so they would have set out. And the other thing we know about the conjunction is that it actually happened three times in one year. Because we can track and know the precise movements of the celestial objects like stars and planets, we can know exactly when this happened actually down to the day. So the magi likely could have seen this happen the first time on May 29th. And after that, at some point they would have set off. And then along the way they would have seen it again on October 3rd. And they would have seen it a third time on December 4th. Right? So from their perspective, which is what really matters here, they would have seen a very bright new star appear.

[11 : 12] They would have set off traveling. They would have seen it appear again and then appear a third time. It was very much as though the star was leading them, prompting them. Right? Right? Westward leading, still proceeding. Right? They're following yonder star.

And so this is, I think, a very plausible way of understanding what's actually happening. But what I want to do now is I want to think about the implications of this frankly kind of bizarre story. You know, it's a weird story. There's some weird elements here that I want to unpack a little bit. The first implication, first implication is this. This story is telling us loudly and clearly that the gospel does not belong to any one culture. But rather the gospel is meant for all cultures.

The gospel does not belong to anyone. It's not proprietary. Rather it's meant for all cultures. What we need to understand about this story is if you were a first century Jew and you came across this account, you would be shocked and you would be offended. Because the point of the story is essentially this.

The Jews have been waiting and waiting for the Messiah to come. The deliverer. And this story is saying this. The Messiah finally came.

All of you Jews were utterly oblivious. But these evil, pagan, foreign astrologers, they were clued in. And while you were looking in another direction, they were worshiping the Messiah. Right? Because you need to understand that in the first century, magi had become associated in Jewish culture with all manner of occult practices.

[12 : 58] They were occult practitioners. This is where we get the word magician and magic. Right? All of those were very negative associations. Virtually every time the word magi shows up in the Bible, it's almost always a negative thing from a Jewish perspective. So this is essentially saying to the Jews, you completely missed the ball. You completely missed it. The Messiah came and these evil, wicked, pagan, occult practitioners, they're the ones who got it.

And this is a warning to religious insiders. This is a stern warning to anybody who assumes that they have a claim over the gospel. Or that somehow because of who they are, they are entitled to some kind of special insider relationship with God. God is saying, absolutely not. The gospel does not belong to any one culture. It is meant for all cultures.

Right? So the best way to understand the gospel is that it's like, you know, one of the analogies we could use is the analogy of planting grapes in different soil. Right? And I use this analogy because I think it's a helpful way to understand how the gospel can take root in different cultures.

You know, if you plant the same grape at several different points, one on a hillside and one up further north and one further south, same grape, it will produce radically different kinds of wine. Right? With lots of different qualities. And the reason for that is all of the differences in climate from one location to the next. Right? And all of those differences from the mineral content in the soil to the level of humidity to how long and hot the summer is, all of those factors go into determining what kind of wine is produced from that grape. It's called terroir. And so in the same way, the gospel is meant to be planted in each culture like a grapevine. And all of those vines come together in Christ, the true vine. And they all produce very distinct expressions of the Christian faith. So there's not just one static kind of Christianity. Right? There's American Christianity, but there's also Arab Christianity. And there's Chinese Christianity. And there's Latin Christianity.

[15 : 08] And there's Indian Christianity. And if you know people who have worshipped in these contexts, yes, we're all Christian. Yes, we share the same faith in the same Savior. And yet the way that gets expressed looks very different. And I think what the Bible is saying is that's the way it

should be.

That's the way it should be. All of the nations, all of the nations expressing their faith in ways that come through their culture, that are reflective of their culture. This is not about the eradication of culture. We're going to talk about that more in a moment. But God intends that the gospel would go to all cultures. This leads to the second implication of the Magi story. God is able to reach people through their individual cultures. So God doesn't come in and say, your culture's in the way. We got to do away with that. Now let's talk about Christianity. God rather reaches people through their cultures.

You know, I've read this story for years. It's one that even people who've never read the Bible are familiar with the story. It's very widely known in pop culture. Have you ever thought about how bizarre the star is? I mean, God uses a star that may not even really be a star to lead foreign non-Jews to faith in Jesus Christ. At face value, what does that seem to be saying? Astrology is true. I mean, that's what it seems to say, right? There is significance, right? It does matter that I'm a Virgo, you know? I should pay attention to that, right? Are you a Pisces? That matters. You know, I'm an Enneagram 9, I'm an ENFP, and I'm a Virgo, and all of that matters, right? It seems to be saying the Bible says astrology is true. What's it actually saying? What it's actually saying is that God is able to use a pagan astrology to lead people to truth in Christ. In other words, He is able to use a religion that is broken, a religion that is ultimately false, but He's able to embed something in that religion that ultimately points people in the direction of saving faith in Jesus Christ.

Now, we have to note that it requires them coming to the Scriptures to actually fully learn who Jesus is, but God is able to reach them through their culture, through things that make sense to them and matter to them. And I think that we almost can't overemphasize how incredibly important that is in terms of what it tells us about the heart of God. That God is not sitting back with His arms crossed, waiting for us to get it right, you know, shaking His head and looking down on these kind of pagan cultures and waiting for them to Christianize. You know, that rather God is availing Himself of every opportunity. God is filling the world with signposts that point to the reality of who He is. That every culture, every religion has embedded within it truth that points to the ultimate embodiment of Jesus Christ as the truth. And you can find it everywhere. And I'm convinced that if we begin to have the eyes to see, we realize that there are signposts everywhere. Right? So, you know, the Bible scholar, N.T. Wright, says that if you look at cultures around the world, you will see that there are certain aspects of human life that seem to be universal. Right? So, every culture has some concept of justice, some concept of freedom, some concept of beauty, some concept of the importance of relationships, some concept of spirituality. Right?

Virtually every culture recognizes that these things are valuable. And people everywhere pursue these things. And yet, the paradox, he says, is that humans everywhere value these things and pursue these things, and yet nobody seems to be able to attain them. Right? Everybody values freedom, but we can't even agree on what freedom is or how to get it. Everybody values justice, and yet we can't even agree on how to define justice or how to achieve it. Everybody seeks beauty, and yet your experience of beauty is that it is always elusive.

[19:52] It never lasts. And it's never as satisfying as it promises it will be. You know, you experience something beautiful, and very often you're left not feeling fulfilled, but feeling an ache. There should have been more there.

It should have lasted longer. It should have satisfied me more, but it's almost as though it awakens a hunger in you that it can't fully satisfy. Now, why would that be the case?

Because? Lionheart says it's because all of these things, justice, freedom, beauty, these are God-given vocations that human beings are meant to pursue. In other words, what does it mean to be human?

It means to pursue justice. Create and appreciate and pursue beauty. create and live within relationships, right?

Seek to ensure that everything living is free, right? All of these things are a part of what it means to be a human. And yet these vocations are impossible apart from God.

[20:59] They're impossible. So every human being everywhere yearns for these things, and yet we can't achieve them apart from Jesus Christ. And so what Wright would say is these are broken signposts.

Every culture has them. Everybody's longing for them. Most of the great world religions try to achieve them. Some freedom, justice. These are universal. And yet he says these are all ultimately

signposts that can only ever be fully satisfied in Jesus Christ.

You'll never find them apart from Him. Right? So the world is full of signposts. God is able to reach people through their own cultures. And I think that this matters tremendously.

For how we think about culture. No culture is evil or good. Every culture has within it aspects that are broken and aspects that are beautiful.

And every culture has within it embedded aspects or pieces of truth. Right? So the Magi followed the star. But the star ultimately led them to the God who made the stars.

[22 : 08] In the same way I think we are called to follow justice, beauty, freedom. Ultimately they're meant to lead us to the God who made justice, beauty, and freedom.

Those are the stars that are out there in the sky for us to follow. So the first point, the gospel is for all cultures. It's meant for everybody. The second point flows out of the first.

God is able to reach people through their individual cultures. He's able to do that. He's that kind of God. And then the last implication that I want to consider with you is this.

That the gospel is meant to renew all cultures. In other words, the gospel doesn't just come in and affirm the culture. Nor does the gospel come in and replace the culture.

The gospel comes in, it's far more nuanced. And it begins to renew the culture. So what do I mean by that? Well, in the story of the Magi, it's obvious when they set out they're bringing kingly gifts.

[23 : 09] Gold, frankincense, myrrh. These are gifts that you would give a great king. They're hoping to meet this king and to pay tribute. Well, what happens when they get there is they realize, it's very clear that they realize, that they're dealing with more than just a human king.

That they have encountered a heavenly king, a divine being. And we know that because they don't just give the gifts. It says that they fall down and they worship him. Now, they come out of a pagan monotheistic religion.

And there's a kind of form of idolatry that's happening there. And yet, I think what we see at the end of this passage, when they fall down and they worship, is a transferring of their allegiance away from the idolatry.

And two, the one who actually merits and deserves their worship and their allegiance. I think this is a conversion that happens. And so, when we see that, we recognize the same thing happens anywhere the gospel is proclaimed.

Because in every culture, as I said a moment ago, there are aspects of that culture that are beautiful, that reflect the truth of who God is. And there are aspects of that culture that are broken.

[24 : 21] They're broken because they are under the power of idols. In other words, every culture has embedded within it idolatry. Idols that hold sway in that culture.

It's one of the things that makes cultures different from one another. It's that every culture has its own embedded idols, right? And so, the gospel enters into a culture, and it renews it by subverting those idols, and then offering something better.

In other words, the gospel says, the ways that you're going about, trying to find justice and beauty and freedom, those attempts are falling short.

And then the gospel offers something better, something that fulfills the deepest hopes and aspirations of that culture, in a way that the other religions and the idols never could.

So, I want to give you some examples, because I know that's pretty abstract. One of the people I like to bring up from time to time is a guy named Laman Sana, who teaches at Yale, and he wrote a book called, *Whose Religion is Christianity?*

[25 : 31] And he talks about the power of the gospel to renew African culture. And he gives a very interesting example of cultural renewal in Africa. He says, part of what it means to be African is to believe in the supernatural.

You believe that there are good spirits, you believe that there are evil spirits, and he says, the problem is the fear and the superstition that that creates. How do you protect yourself from the evil spirits?

How do you protect your family? A lot of fear, a lot of superstition. And so, Laman Sana, who, because of his experience at Yale, he says, you know, what happens when I send an African to Harvard or Yale or Princeton or Oxford or Cambridge?

He says, here's what happens. They go to a place like that, and here's what they're told. We love multiculturalism. We love the fact that you're African.

We want you to stay African. We want you to wear your African clothing. We want you to dance your African dances. We want you to eat your African food. But when it comes to the supernatural, they're told, oh, no, no, no, you've got to leave that behind.

[26 : 37] Because we've progressed further than you as a society. We've realized that everything has a scientific explanation. We're no longer superstitious. We no longer believe in the supernatural, so you've got to leave that behind.

Wear your clothes, dance your dances, but let go of the supernatural stuff. And Sana says, you may not realize that when you tell that to an African, you're stripping them of their Africanness. You're stripping away something that is quintessential to their sense of identity and the way they construe the world.

And he says, you know, they may not be wearing pith helmets, but this is cultural imperialism at its best, or should I say at its worst. And he says, by contrast, Christianity respects my Africanness. Because the good news of Christianity says, yes, there's a supernatural world. Yes, there are good spirits.

And yes, there are evil spirits. And yes, at one time, we did have to worry about that. But now, because of the victory of Jesus Christ, we have been set free from that fear.

[27 : 44] And anyone who puts their faith and their trust in Jesus no longer has to fear the supernatural world because he is Lord over all of it. And you were utterly safe and utterly free in him.

And so, so Sana says, the gospel renews my Africanness. It allows me to hold on to my belief in the supernatural, but it sets me free from the idols of fear and superstition.

This is how the gospel renews culture. And we need to understand that that's one example, but this kind of thing happens all the time in all different ways.

Right? Right? So in our culture, we could pick any number of idols that hold sway in our culture, but we are a very individualistic culture.

We worship personal autonomy. We worship individual freedom. And the gospel would come into a culture like ours and say, life isn't about building up your own brand.

[28 : 47] Life is about giving yourself away. And the gospel would say, you're not meant to live on your own. You're not meant to have that kind of existential autonomy that you crave.

In fact, you're made and wired for relationship. So community matters and family matters. And those things should be among your highest priorities. Right? So the gospel begins to subvert that idol in our culture.

But then you go to another culture. There are other cultures that are on the other end of the extreme. Right? They make an idol out of family. And these are cultures where family matters so much, and the honor of that family matters so much, that if you bring dishonor or shame on your family, you could be exiled or even stoned to death.

And people would see that as being justice. Right? And so the gospel would have a very different message to that culture. The gospel would say, yes, your nuclear family matters, but there's actually a family that matters more than that.

And that is the great family that God is building out of all the families of the earth. And that family is not bound together by honor. That family is bound together by mercy and compassion.

[30 : 05] And you see that lived out in Jesus Christ in a way that you will not see it anywhere else. Right? And so the gospel comes into culture, and it begins to subvert the idols and offer something better in every case.

Right? So in a culture that worships power, the gospel offers the meekness of Jesus Christ. In a culture that worships accomplishment, the gospel offers the humility of Christ.

In a culture that worships wealth, the gospel offers the generosity of Christ. In a culture that worships relativism, the gospel offers the truth of Christ. In a culture that worships human reason, the gospel offers the wisdom of Christ.

Right? Which is foolishness to those who would presume that they're wise. Again and again and again, in every case, the gospel subverts the idols and offers something better.

And so these are the things that I think that the story of the Magi is meant to teach us. I think it's meant to teach us that the gospel doesn't belong to any one culture. It's meant for all the cultures. It's also meant to teach us that God is able to reach people through their culture on terms that they can understand.

[31 : 15] If you need more proof of that, that's what the incarnation is. It's God saying to human beings, I will condescend. I will empty myself of my glory and my power so that you can see me in a way that will make sense to you.

So that you can perceive me on your terms. Right? So if God does that in the incarnation, wouldn't He at least do that in order to make the incarnation known?

Right? And then lastly, that the purpose of the gospel is to renew culture. Is to bring renewal, freedom, justice, life to the people all over the world.

Right? So one of my hopes for Advent this year is that this wouldn't just be something that we talk about on Epiphany, but rather that first we would be thinking together how does the gospel need to renew our culture?

Our specific culture? What are the idols that need to be subverted in our lives? And then number two, what part are we as a church called to play in God's desire to bring the gospel to the nations?

[32 : 25] You know, we as a church, we support, you may not know that we support and have supported for years now missionary church planters in the Persian Gulf region. Because we believe that the gospel is for the nations.

And there are things that we do like that, but we actually don't have to travel in a place like D.C. to the nations because the nations come here. And so how do we, a church like us, how do we, what role are we called to play in the gospel crossing cultural borders and boundaries?

In everyone hearing the good news of Jesus Christ. What might that look like? Let's dream and pray about that together this year. It's only appropriate that we end with this collect, this prayer that comes from the Book of Common Prayer.

O Lord Jesus Christ, you stretched out your arms of love on the hard wood of the cross that everyone might come within the reach of your saving embrace. So clothe us in your spirit that we, reaching forth our hands in love, may bring those who do not know you to the knowledge and the love of you.

For the honor of your name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.