

Sharing the Gospel as Good News (3)

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[0 : 00] Well, good morning, team. Last week, we explored the art of having the gospel heard as good news.

And we particularly looked at Paul in his gospel engagement with the Athenians. And a central observation was how he connected the gospel to his hearer's world.

Offered Christ as the answer to a question they were asking. We also noted how the profuse richness of the gospel itself and its abundant themes and variations resource us to do just that.

That is, particularize and personalize the gospel message to each heart at its point of hunger.

Now today, we continue our study by considering six stars to navigate by in our witness-bearing encounters. That is, beacons which can illuminate our path of engagement.

[1 : 13] Principles to bear in mind to help us in our desire to love our neighbor well. Not simply by seeking to share the good news with them, but how we do so.

And I do hope that a common spirit comes through in these habits offered for our cultivation. A spirit which I trust is the spirit of Christ.

That said, let's proceed with prayer. Lord Christ, we thank you that you are our portion and you are indeed the best of portions.

May we enjoy you as such and out of that supreme enjoyment, proclaim you as infinitely enjoyable. Lord, would you grant us insight and application as we consider these principles together this morning.

And Lord, may we so enjoy the gospel ourselves that it is of great comfort to us, your people, and great credit to you, our marvelous Savior.

[2 : 29] And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. So, our first guiding star is proceed with good questions.

Now, I'm probably not capable of overstating the importance of this. Now, it is a challenge, at least for me, but it is vitally important. It alone can transform the encounter from a disquisition.

And few can abide being subject to something so one-sided. From a disquisition to a dialogue. A dialogue which goes back and forth with the natural sustaining and pleasing rhythm of breathing.

To ask a question is to show interest in the other. It is to invite their thoughts and feelings. It is to beckon them to build something together.

And by proceed with questions. And by proceed with questions, I mean begin and continue with questions. And last week, we observed the importance of connecting the gospel to the concerns of the other if the gospel is to be heard as good news.

[3 : 51] But unless we are content to be heard as good news. But unless we are content to simply speculate, how are we to discover what their concerns are? Unless we coax them out with questions.

Apart from such revealing questions, we risk casting Christ as an answer to an issue that they don't have. Hence, it is pivotal to begin with questions.

But once begun, we also want to continue with questions. For this is the means by which, among other things, the conversation can continue in the natural sustaining rhythm of give and take.

And by good questions, I mean questions which feel natural and appropriate to ask. And also seminal or germinal.

That is, questions that can give birth to interesting and enjoyable interaction. A good question is like a womb in which things come to life and gestate and are born.

[5 : 02] In similar metaphor, Socrates, a master asker of questions, spoke of questions as midwives. Facilitating the birth of something.

A truth. An insight. An epiphany. A realization. A refinement. A conviction. Well, let's look at an example of this in Acts 8 with Philip.

Picking up where we left off previously with Philip on his desert road errand. And happening upon an Ethiopian reading aloud from his chariot. That's in verse 30.

Acts chapter 8 verse 30. Which reads, So Philip ran to him and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet and asked, Do you understand what you're reading?

Notice Philip launches the interaction with asking a question. Do you understand what you're reading? The question, what are you reading?

[6 : 04] Is a good question, especially in the academy, as people are reading all the time. And typically, what we read reflects what interests us. Also, Philip's question of the eunuch and those like it have the promise of engaging the other's point of reference.

Where they are coming from. We don't ask them to attend what we think is important. Rather, we reflect in our question that we are willing to attend to what they feel is important.

What if we don't start with questions? What if we simply launch into a disquisition? What effect will that have on the interaction of our interlocutors' experience?

Yeah, yeah. Yeah, surely they will feel no more than a prop in our own drama.

An object, not a subject. And notice, as a result of Philip's question, he is invited by the eunuch to say more.

[7 : 15] You see, we want to ask and to respond in a way that results in an invitation to continue. Not our buttonholing, rather their beckoning, should be the dynamic that moves the conversation along.

We want to let the other, in virtue of their interest, keep drawing out our further thoughts and questions. So let's not assume that they want to hear more.

Let them elicit it. And again, this is simply what it means to show love in a conversation. Preferring the other in love.

And not only does Philip begin with a question, it is the continuing ethos. It's not, for Philip, simply a formal technique.

It's rather the whole spirit of his interaction. As the narrative continues, so verses 30 to 35, so Philip ran to him and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet and asked, Do you understand what you're reading?

[8 : 27] And he said, Well, how can I, unless someone guides me? And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. Now the passage of Scripture that he was reading was this.

Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb before his shearers is silent, so he opens not his mouth. In his humiliation, justice was denied him.

Who could describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth. And the eunuch said to Philip, About whom, I ask you, does the prophet say this?

About himself? Or about someone else? Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this Scripture, he told him the good news about Jesus.

So, amazingly, Philip finds himself in the chariot next to the Ethiopian, with the passage of Isaiah the prophet opened before him.

[9 : 30] I can imagine myself thinking, What an entree! I sure know what to say on this topic. I've thought a lot about this. Now is my chance.

But Philip does not say in his zeal, Oh, listen to this. I know a thing or two about this topic. Then launch into a disquisition. Even at the point where he has so many things he could say, he holds his tongue and lets the eunuch start with his question.

Had I been in Philip's place, verse 34, I assure you, would no doubt have recorded my speech. In fact, I probably would have started talking before the eunuch finished uttering his last word in Isaiah's text.

But not Philip. He does not open his mouth yet. Rather, he lets the eunuch speak and ask his question.

Then, verse 35, Then, not before, Philip opened his mouth. Friends, this is other-centered witness bearing.

[10 : 44] It cares for the other as a person. It doesn't treat them as a project or merely a prospective proselyte. Wise witness bearing is as much about knowing when to keep our mouths closed as when to open them.

And making it our determined practice to proceed with good questions could help us realize that ambition.

Here are some questions I recently asked and found helpful toward discovering what someone cares about. Remember, we want to start to connect the gospel with what people care about. How do we discover what people care about? Well, we ask good questions. Here are a couple that I've used recently. What was some value that got inculcated when you were young that has continued to have for you a significant afterlife?

If you'd love to share, I'd certainly love to hear. Or another I asked this week. If you were to see your life, till now, as a several-act drama, freeze frame a scene or two that you would say have been most determinative for who you are or aspire to be.

[12:12] I asked that one because the guy introduced himself as an actor. I thought it would be apropos to put it in those terms. Led to a really good conversation. Found out a lot about the guy. Here's another.

If you came across Aladdin's lamp and were given three wishes, what three things would you change about your life or about the world?

See, coming up with good questions is seldom a spontaneous attainment. Typically, it requires some advanced pondering. But I find it is so worth the investment.

For if I have some good questions at hand, good, salty conversations are far more likely to emerge. As a witness bearer, make it your practice to concoct and collect good questions and launch and lard your conversations with them.

You know, a great study to do would be to go through the Gospels and look at the questions that Jesus asks. That'd be a good way to be tutored in that. So there's the first.

[13:30] Proceed with good questions. The second star to navigate by is frame the interaction collaboratively.

You know, it's often the case that as witness bearers, we find ourselves inhabiting a very different worldview from our neighbor with whom we're engaging.

Our beliefs and behaviors are often at odds and our attempts to persuade can set us in opposition and we experience the engagement conflictually.

We kind of face off as conversational antagonists. Far more fruitful, I've found, is to frame the discussion collaboratively such that we range ourselves shoulder to shoulder collectively addressing the question at hand, each offering what they have to contribute.

How might one do this? Well, sometimes I open a conversation like this. Do you ever feel like life tosses us up in the midst of a drama and we have to scramble to figure out what the drama is about and what our role is in the play?

[14:55] Do you have a sense of what the plot is and you're part of it? Or sometimes I might use a different metaphor. Do you ever get a sense that life feels like a huge puzzle that we're trying to put together with no picture on the box to go by?

Do you think you've found any corner pieces? Is a picture taking shape for you? And sometimes I'll continue the metaphor by taking up some single puzzle piece of life.

Perhaps the phenomenon of consciousness or a sense of being in a moral world or a hunger a hunger for justice or beauty or intimacy.

Some perplexing feature and hold it up and say hey what do you make of this piece? What picture might this point to?

Do you think the blue here with a bit of white suggests ocean with the crest of a wave or could it perhaps be sky with a wisp of cloud?

[16:02] In other words what kind of universe do you think we might be in? A purely material one? Or do you feel these puzzle pieces point towards something else?

Some transcendence? Do you see even feel how such a framing makes a difference as to how the interaction is experienced?

You see it puts us alongside our neighbor laboring together to understand our existence and unravel together its mysteries not above them decanting our pronouncements from on high and neither are we locked in antagonistic combat in some gladiatorial fight to the death.

During the Hundred Years War between England and France the English developed a decisively effective weapon the longbow and that was the winning weapon in battle but it was wielded not by the aristocratic knights rather by the common yeoman but to win the battles the English gentry had

to get down off their high horses and stand shoulder to shoulder with their compatriot peasant and protect him as he and his longbow delivered the victory and historians credit this simple act of standing shoulder to shoulder on the same footing with sparing England the violent class revolution which roiled France in blood subsequently 1789 and the witness bearer will recognize a similar potency to diffuse antagonistic spirit simply by reframing our interactions collaboratively getting down off our high horse and standing side by side tackling together the mysteries of existence so in your encounters frame your interactions collaboratively it's a star to navigate by and here's a third star to navigate by listen well listen well and really in order for our first two guiding habits to have any integrity we really must listen well

I mean if we don't listen well our asking questions is only formal if their speech is only an irritating delay for our speech then our asking questions is just hypocrisy if we frame the discussion collaboratively but don't attend to their contribution our so framing the interaction is merely an offensive technique I find often at the root of my own failure to listen or to listen well is sometimes my disbelief that what I will hear is going to be anything worthwhile that I really have nothing to learn from my conversation partner now why would this attitude be almost certainly in every instance wrong well because we know that every other and no less non-believing others are yet image bearers and as such have capacity for the good the true the just and beautiful and indeed they may have a far greater giftedness for penetrating the depths of those realities than we have we have something to learn from everyone and we have much to learn from many so let us listen well let us ask ourselves occasionally what have I learned from unbelievers lately which has been consequential in my life perhaps even fundamentally reframing if I answer that question honestly [20 : 52] I will have good reason to and want to listen well and if I answer it in the negative I suspect I might just be an epistemological bigot that is thinking I can learn nothing from unbelievers then I just have bad theology I've completely missed the implication that every human being is an image bearer and is capable of knowing truth or perhaps my problem is simply I simply interact with brothers and sisters of the sanctuary and I fail to get out much beyond church potlucks oh brothers and sisters let's not let that be the case we are not to be of the world but we are to be in it we are to be in it so a fourth star to navigate by in our witness bearing is lead with affirmation and look for resonances lead with affirmation and look for resonances we've observed this in Paul with the

Athenians remember he led with affirmation chapter 17:22 men of Athens I perceive that in every way you are very religious and just as the apostle would be with his Athenian hearers we will inevitably come to challenge and critique it's going to be inevitable there's going to be something that we're going to critique but Paul does not open with critique and we would be wise to follow him in this we also notice Paul had found within the Athenians beliefs notions which were consonant with biblical truth instincts that they had which ran along the grain of the gospel he cites some of their poets and philosophers affirmatively and he builds his case in part out of their hunches beliefs and values now what we might ask gave the apostle confidence that he would find such common ground even among his pagan hearers some resonances that he could appeal to and work with now this is important for us to have this confidence in Romans chapter 1

Paul relates that God has revealed himself to humanity and although we seek to smother the truth of God to evade his claim upon us we suppress this truth incompletely and inconsistently there remains truth about God that we know notice the present tense of verse 32 we know these things indeed our ongoing suppression of these truths belies that it remains exerting counter pressure and ready to bob up to the surface of our consciousness if we relax our efforts to repress it now we might call these vestigial truths or echoes of the knowledge of God and we through our rebelliousness would mute these echoes but we can never finally silence them we can never fully rid ourselves of the truths and tokens that derive from the reality of

God you see sin is not omnipotent it can deface but never completely efface the divine fingerprints that are inscribed upon us image bearers neither the imprint of the creator in broader creation however much we try radically to redecorate our consciousness there is always furniture mental moral material that persists in pointing to the divine presence!

and so! residences will always remain and when discovered we can affirm them it's kind of like we need to hold these things up into the light and point out look there's a watermark here we didn't see it first point these things out in conversations as witness bearers look for opportunities to affirm yes that seems right to me yeah that instinct feels solid to me you know that strikes me as a critical thread in this matter let's pull on that together it seems to be a promising lead so you want to look

for opportunity to say such things and lead your interaction with them and even if we find little to agree upon perhaps affirm that you share the conviction that this is a critical and consequential topic which deserves our best attention and reflection so let's let's receive even as we give so lead with affirmation and look for resonances well here's another a fifth star to navigate by and that is be prepared to tell your story be prepared to tell your story at times the faith that we commend is regarded by our neighbors as unimaginable and it is inconceivable to them that they could ever arrive at it the conviction is like that of the old new england farmer who when asked how do you get to a certain town he responded!

[27 : 49] you can't get there from here well one helpful way of bridging that gap in imagination is by telling the story of how you in fact managed to get there you see your story can take the unimaginable and break it down into small concrete steps I can't get there from here well sure you can I did here's how like Indiana Jones in the last crusade who remember that scene he threw sand across on the invisible bridge across that chasm similarly our personal stories may render visible a path that as yet may not be seen in telling our story it can be helpful to show how where we started out is not that different perhaps from where our hearer now stands and finds themselves so when Paul addressed Jews who found his faith unimaginable he emphasized how he had been as he put it just as you are in Acts 22 chapter 3 he says I am a Jew he tells to the crowd that he is a Jewish crowd that he is conversing with I am a Jew born in Tarsus of Cilicia but brought up in this city educated at the feet of Gamaliel according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers being zealous for God as all of you are this very day he would go on to tell them that that his initial reaction to the Christian faith was just as negative as theirs likely more so verse four I persecuted this way to the death binding and delivering to prison both men and women as the high priest and the whole council of elders can bear me witness now why is this kind of identification so vital you see

Paul's hearers and ours must sense that we get how indigestible our message may sound to them they need to sense that we really comprehend and feel the reasons that compel them to reject our message and if we don't acknowledge the reality and intensity of the bones stuck in the throat we really won't have any personal credibility with them it will reinforce the perhaps presumed or at least strongly suspected alienness of us not just our message of us interestingly if we compare the two accounts of Paul's telling his story that occur in Acts one before the temple mob that we just looked at and then one before

King Agrippa that occurs in Acts 26 we notice some variation he is adapting his testimony to his audience now remember that every gospel testimony presents Jesus as the answer to some question and the fulfillment of some deep desire and in all likelihood our stories of God's saving dealings with us will have all kinds of themes and themes as intricate and multiple as the distributaries in the Nile Delta but which course should our narrative take along which of the many possible themes should we unfold our story of faith well let us select our theme according to which we think might be most resonant to our hearers in other words we seek to contextualize our story within what we know of their story and just as the gospel itself has wonderful adaptability and applicability so also does our experience of the gospel and we adapt it and apply it according to our audience so it's well worth thinking through the story of how

God brought you to himself what are its themes which of those themes might resonate with your as yet unbelieving neighbors see as witness bearers we want to be prepared to speak our story and maybe be prepared to be able to speak it variously along several themes depending upon the resonance of each does that make sense good good no I'm glad I'm glad well as our final guiding star keep fresh and vivid how the gospel is good news for you keep fresh and vivid how the gospel is good news for you well we've emphasized how for the gospel to be heard as good news we need to connect it to our neighbors cares well how does the gospel bring good news to those places which absorb them whether places of longing reflecting the stirrings of the image of God or places of languishing reflecting the experience of the brokenness in our fallen world we are all as fallen humans in the image of

[34 : 40] God a melange of anguish and aspiration a composite nursery of insecurities a china cabinet of fragility and an orphanage of longings and it is to these soarings and sighings that we want to bring the hope of the gospel but how will we grow in the skill of applying this the gospel pan pharmacon or the universal healing bomb to the ailments and the longings of our world how do we do it how do we get good at doing that well by applying the gospel to our own ailments and our own

longings does that make sense yeah yeah yeah we we need to keep fresh and vivid how the gospel is good news for us in these very things and not just generically but with all of its comprehensive particularity and concreteness so when we ourselves and we will we ourselves and we will experience the ache of longing then we need to ask of ourselves does does this not reflect the agitation of a soul that shall never find its full fulfillment in any earthly object see

I'm preaching the gospel to myself surely such earthly objects only stir up a hunger they can never satisfy plunge myself in earthly pools as ever much I may they never satisfy they never have they never will this is my unrelieved experience the longing lingers the restlessness always remains and shall ever remain until it finds its rest in the eternal God the eternal God alone whose welcome and rest the gospel proclaims and which peace and joy I have truly felt in my in most places by the power of the

Holy Spirit what am I doing I'm preaching the gospel to myself I'm applying the good news to my aches so I feel its comfort more vividly and I get to the point where I can say can I say one thing have I desired that will I seek after that I may dwell in the house of the Lord forever surely in his presence his fullness of joy and at his right hand are pleasures forevermore need to preach the gospel to ourselves to feel its vividness to feel that it is good news and when we experience the ache of sorrow that slowly ceaselessly grinds our fondest earthly hopes to dust by its many millstones when the quiet accumulation of disappointment scatters across the landscape of our life like the trail of cherished belongings discarded from covered wagons heading west over the Rockies when our lot is the rubble and ruin of shattered hopes and aching loss can we then yet affirm with Habakkuk that gospel wonder though the fig tree should not blossom nor fruit beyond the vines the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls yet I will rejoice in the Lord I will take joy in the God of my salvation can we take joy in the gospel can we welcome from afar that sure and unfading gospel hope that Christ will himself wipe away every tear and sorrow and sighing shall flee away can we hear within our soul that voice of many waters proclaim behold

I am making all things new and when our sands are low and the silver cord shall soon be snapped and the pitcher be shattered at the fountain and the all devouring grave looms before us and would snuff out all things dear to us upon this earth and we must be wrapped in death's shroud make our home in the grave and mingle once more with kindred dust will we yet hear those words in faith whispered by the master I am the resurrection and the life whoever believes in me though they die yet they shall live oh friends as we keep fresh and vivid these glorious gospel truths in our own life we as witness bearers shall be able to testify to them with that same freshness and vividness among our neighbors when the gospel is good news to us gloriously ecstatically we shall be able to share it as indeed glorious good news to others amen amen amen thank you team next week we will continue on with our final final session first steps in getting started and lord willing we will be together then do make haste so we can make it to the service thanks and blessings team and lord willing see you next week blessings on you