

All Things to All Men

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Introduction.

To this point in time, we've spent much of our series on evangelism talking about how we need to love people and do good in their lives, so that they will regard us as good people who care about them. However, if we stop right there, our friends will never obey the gospel. Instead, we have to find a way to get them to turn their attention to Jesus, to realize that just as we've helped them with their problems, Jesus will help them in the greatest way imaginable.

If I had to guess, this is perhaps the single part of evangelism that Christians find most difficult. How do we shift the conversation from earthly things to spiritual things in a way that leaves our listeners receptive? How do we start telling somebody else about Jesus without things going awkward and weird? Much as I'd love to tell you otherwise, brethren, there's no one right way to do that. There's no one canned spiritual pickup line that all of us can use. Instead, just like everything else about evangelism, that conversational switch has to be genuine, it has to come from who we really are, and it has to take into account both who our hearers are and the circumstances in which they find themselves.

Some Christians regard adapting the message, and indeed adapting ourselves, to different times and places and people as being somehow a betrayal of the gospel. Needless to say, Christians who think like that aren't very good at evangelism. We see where the apostle Paul stands on this in 1 Corinthians 9:22-23. One of Paul's greatest strengths as a seeker of the lost was his ability to communicate with different groups in dramatically different ways, to talk to Jews like a Jew one day and talk to Gentiles like a Gentile the next. In fact, Scripture tells us that all the great evangelists of the first century, from Jesus on down, found their success by talking to people where they were and in a way they could understand. Let's learn from some of those examples of evangelism as we consider how to be all things to all men.

The Practical and the Scriptural.

Of course, the very best at reaching people where they were was Jesus, and one of His greatest abilities was His skill at leading others to God by showing them the **PRACTICAL APPLICATION** of godliness. Notice the way He does this in His dealings with the woman at the well, beginning with John 4:7-10. Certainly, Jesus had the advantage of being able to read hearts, but it's easy to see why He begins this conversation the way He does. Today, we have hot and cold running water available in our homes, but back then, if you were a Samaritan living in the village of Sychar, if you wanted water, you had to take your heavy clay waterpot and lug it all the way to the well of Jacob, which was perhaps a mile or more from town. Then, you had to take your even heavier clay waterpot filled with water, and lug it all the way back. This difficult, boring, time-consuming task was something that the Samaritan woman did every day of her life, and just like we get sick of washing dishes or mowing the lawn, she was sick of carrying water. So what does Jesus do? He starts off talking to her about the one thing she obviously cares about and needs. He starts talking about water.

Look at how this continues in John 4:13-15. After more conversation about water, Jesus tells her how He can help her with her water problem. He can give her water that will refresh her forever. How does she respond? Exactly how we would expect her to respond. She asks Him how she can get this living water, and boom! There is Jesus' opening to preach the gospel to her. Jesus handles this conversation so deftly that the woman and much of her village believe.

None of us will ever be as good as the Master at reaching the lost, but we can still learn from His wisdom. Here's what we should take from this: We should pay attention to people, notice where their needs are, and then tell them how the gospel will meet those needs. For example, let's say that we have a co-worker we've been working on. She comes in one morning complaining about the hard time she's having with her kids. There's her need, and there's our opening. Now we can tell her how our church will teach her kids to be better kids, and her to be a better parent. She has a problem, we hand her the solution, and ultimately, the solution is about getting her life right with Jesus.

Of course, not all the opportunities we are given have to do with meeting practical needs. Sometimes, the best place to start off with a seeker is through **SCRIPTURAL REASONING**. Perhaps the best example of this in all of Scripture is the first gospel sermon on the day of Pentecost. Notice both the audience and Peter's approach to the audience in Acts 2:5, 14, 16. When Luke tells us that the crowd on the day of Pentecost was made up of devout Jews, that's not just an off-the-cuff compliment. Here's how devout these Jews were. They lived all over the Mediterranean, sometimes thousands of miles away from Jerusalem, but they'd made that difficult, dangerous trek to be in Jerusalem for the Passover, and they'd stayed in Jerusalem for nearly two months so they could celebrate Pentecost too. They loved God so much that they probably spent about a third of their lives away from their homes and families just to worship Him. Brethren, that's dedication! Now, if these Jews cared that much about Judaism, how well do you think they knew the Law? Way better than many Christians today know the Bible, I'll tell you that much. So how does Peter address this audience of Scripturally learned, devout Jews? He starts off with Scripture and builds his whole argument on it.

We see the effect of Peter's Scriptural reasoning in Acts 2:36-37. This comes at the end of a highly logical, highly textual argument that Jesus was the Christ. His audience is familiar with all the texts that Peter is citing, and they see immediately just how strong his logic is. They are pierced to the heart, they cry out asking what they can do, and boom! There's Peter's opening. Now he can tell them how to become Christians and expect that they will obey the gospel.

Likewise, there are plenty of seekers today who are familiar with the Bible. My mother's ladies' class at the Senior Center in Columbia has attracted visitors from all kinds of denominational backgrounds. Some of those visitors aren't interested in genuine Scriptural study, but some of them are, and the ones who are will stick around. We often have people like that in our lives too. Back when I worked for the University of Missouri Department of Agriculture, I had several co-workers who were interested in the Scripture on some level, from the girl who was a Mennonite to the guy who was fascinated by the idea of the lost tribes of Israel. I wasn't nearly as aware of it at the time, but those were people I had a chance to build credibility with, and we can build credibility with the Scripturally learned who are around us today. If they come to see us as good students of the Bible, they may well be open to hearing about the gospel too.

Help and Discussion.

Sadly, most people in our day don't know the Bible that well or love it that much. However, we can still have opportunity to reach out to them by offering **HELP IN HARD TIMES**. Perhaps the best example of a man in difficult circumstances obeying the gospel is the Philippian jailer. His desperate situation is described in Acts 16:26-27. Remember, friends: the Roman society of the first century was not particularly tolerant of failure. Guards who failed in their watch were commonly executed in disgrace. When the earthquake opens the prison doors, the jailer quite literally sees his life wiped out by an act of God. He is so filled with despair that suicide seems like the best option.

Rarely in Scripture do we see a man's life turn around so quickly, though, as his life did. Paul begins the process in Acts 16:28-30. Suddenly, the jailer is filled with hope because apparently he hasn't failed in his duties. However, he's not about to forget his previous experiences. He now knows that he's not in control of his own life, that everything that he values can be snatched away in an instant, and there's nothing he can do about it. It's not even certain that the jailer knows the name of Jesus at this point, but he certainly does know that he needs protection from someone more powerful than he is. He rushes in to Paul and Silas, asks them what he has to do to be saved, and boom! There's Paul's opening. He's able to talk about his Savior to someone who clearly recognizes their own need for help and salvation.

Especially in difficult economic times like these, we have no shortage of people around us who are reeling. Life has been kicking them around like a soccer ball, and they know without a doubt that they are not in control and that if they are left to themselves, things will not work out. Perhaps more than any other group, these are people who are hungry for Jesus. They need something to tie their boat to, and if they don't find us, they'll probably find something else. That tells us, then, that we should watch for people who are dealing with job loss, who are facing serious illness in themselves or a loved one, who are wrestling with dreadful family problems, or may even be crushed by bereavement. Remember, brethren: God is near to the brokenhearted, and they are near to Him. Let's comfort but use the opportunity too.

Finally, the Scripture tells us that still others may be reached through **PHILOSOPHICAL DISCUSSION**. Paul begins his encounter with a philosophical crowd in Acts 17:16-17. Perhaps more than any other city described in Scripture, Athens was the equivalent of a modern college town. Wealthy Romans would often send their sons to Athens to study philosophy, other rich men who were interested in learning would spend their lives there, and penniless philosophers from across the Roman Empire traveled there in hopes of finding a patron. In short, the whole city was filled with people who had nothing better to do with their lives than talk and debate, and listen to others talk and debate. Paul, of course, was a man who loved nothing better than a challenge, and we can imagine him charging into this intellectual brawl with both fists, attacking idolatry, exposing human philosophy, and proclaiming Jesus as the Christ.

Somebody who's raising a daily ruckus like Paul was doing wasn't about to go unnoticed, and we see the Athenians' reaction to him in Acts 17:18-19. The Epicureans and the Stoics were two of the most prominent philosophical schools of Paul's day, and they're not the only ones who are interested in what Paul is teaching. Because of the novelty of his views, they invite him to address a whole crowd of philosophers on the Areopagus, which was a big rocky outcrop in the middle of the city of Athens, not too far from the Parthenon. It was apparently a common site for teaching and debate. As with the other examples here, that creates Paul's opening to tell the Athenians about Jesus.

We can find similar openings today in our dealings with people who are interested in intellectual discourse. A lot of the time, people like this are still fairly young, college-age or so, who are still trying to figure out what their worldview is. One of the beauties of Christianity is that it gives us a way of thinking about the world that is coherent, consistent, and convincing. That means that what we believe will hang together despite a philosophical pounding. If we do a good job of defending what we believe when the subject comes up, speaking logically, not losing our cool, then that will win us points with an intellectual audience. Like Paul was, we may well be given an opportunity to tell them about Jesus and possibly win them over to our way of thinking too. Let's be prepared to handle philosophical discussion.