

An Outsider's Perspective

M. W. Bassford, 9-5-10

One of the most valuable skills that we can acquire as Christians is the ability to see through someone else's eyes. If we wish to be kind, compassionate, and wise as the Bible commands, we must learn to understand where they're coming from, what their goals are, and how we can help them. Without this insight, we're as likely to harm as to heal.

However, this critical skill is frequently neglected where it is most important—in the area of evangelism. Many Christians think of evangelism in the same way that the stereotypical caveman thought about wedding proposals. The strategy is to walk up to the prospect, beat him over the head with the club of the Spirit, grab him by the hair, and drag him into church. Even in situations where we think about the other person at all, we tend to assume that he has the same knowledge base, the same spiritual standards, and the same perspective that we do. I myself used to believe that members of the denominations thought about Christianity in just the same way as I did, except with some doctrinal differences.

That's a terrible mistake to make. It is absolutely true that the gospel is the power of God to salvation. It is absolutely true that men are saved when the seed of the word takes root in their heart. However, the record of the first century clearly reveals to us that the evangelists of the first century did not mechanically recite the word in exactly the same way to every prospect they encountered. Instead, they considered their audience first, and then they presented the gospel in a way that was precisely calculated to appeal to that audience. That's how they succeeded.

Today, then, if we want to be effective evangelists, we have to use wisdom to understand the soil where we are sowing. People haven't changed much in 2000 years, and the same attitudes that non-Christians had back then are still with us today. Let's look at some of them and their implications for us as we study an outsider's perspective.

General Perspectives.

One of the first things that we must grasp about people outside the church is that if we asked them and they were honest, they would say, **"I HAVE ALREADY FORMED MY OWN MORAL BELIEFS."** With each year that passes, our country becomes increasingly like Israel as described in Judges 21:25. This doesn't mean that people are amoral. Far from it. Most people have codes that they live by, but they patch that code together haphazardly from things they hear rather than basing it on God's word, and this grab-bag approach to morality produces things that are incomprehensible to us. They may believe that homosexual behavior is acceptable to God, or that women should have leading roles in worship services, or that they can be pleasing to God without setting foot in a church building at all.

If we don't recognize the existence of this moral code before we say anything else, we're going to fail. Nor can we necessarily address the problem by citing book, chapter, and verse. If we're working with someone who doesn't accept the Bible as his standard, our Bible quotation isn't going to mean squat. Instead, we have to go deeper than that. We have to persuade people that the Bible is the standard, and that it should win out over their existing beliefs.

Second, most outsiders would acknowledge, **"I AM ATTACHED TO MY FAMILY'S RELIGION."** This was just as prevalent 2000 years ago. Look at what the woman at the well tells Jesus in John 4:19-20. In her mind, it is valid to worship God on the mountain because her fathers did it, and what they did must be right. To her, Daddy and Granddaddy were just as much a source of spiritual authority as the Law of Moses.

Even if most people won't work it out that completely, family religion is just as important today. Sometimes, this works in our favor. I know that if I'm working with a prospect who has a family connection to the Lord's church, that's really going to smooth the way for the gospel. However, if that family connection pulls them in another direction, that makes a whole lot of extra work, and we can't afford to dismiss the family-religion arguments simply because they don't register on our scale of relevance. They might not make sense to us, but they make a whole lot of sense to the person making them. There aren't any magic bullets here. We just have to patiently, repeatedly point them back to the word.

Third, most of our prospects could honestly say, **"I USUALLY RESIST CHANGE."** Look, for instance, at Stephen's description of the Sanhedrin in Acts 7:51. They'd just heard this spellbinding sermon from Stephen, but instead of being convinced by it, they were willing to commit murder to continue in their same spiritual track.

In just the same way, most of the people we talk to about the word are going to want to continue in their same spiritual track. Certainly, there are exceptions to the rule. If some outsider doesn't like where his current spiritual life has been leading him, he may well be open to change. However, if somebody's happy right where he is, our task is much more difficult. It's not enough for us to point out the five steps of salvation and give him a gentle shove in the direction of the baptism. He's not ready for that. He isn't going to go, because he doesn't want to go. Instead, our job is to work on that basic want-to. Peter had such success with his sermon on the day of Pentecost precisely because he nailed the want-to. He showed his audience that they had crucified the Son of God, so they were crying out for a solution before he ever got to "Repent, and be baptized." Today, we must persuade others that they need to change before they will do so.

This process is made all the more difficult because if most non-Christians were telling the truth, they would confess, **“I DON’T KNOW ANYTHING ABOUT THE GOSPEL.”** This is true not just of non-churchgoers. It’s true of churchgoers too. Many of them are in the same boat as the so-called “disciples” Paul met in Acts 19:1-2. These men were meeting together and did some religious stuff, but they didn’t have a clue about even the first principles.

Unless we’re wasting our time arguing with door-to-door missionaries, this is almost certainly going to be true of anyone we study with too. Most Americans out there, even Americans who assemble someplace every Sunday morning, have very little knowledge about the Scripture. What’s worse, they don’t even know how to get knowledge from the Scripture. We take it for granted that we can flip open the Bible to some passage and figure out what the passage says. However, that’s not something we were born doing. It’s something we learned to do. It’s a skill, and we perfect that skill every time we come together. Most people can learn to do the same, but they certainly aren’t doing it before we get to them. The idea that they can extract truth from God’s word is foreign to their religious experience.

As a consequence of this, most of our neighbors could well say, **“I CAN’T TELL THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN CHURCHES.”** In this, they reflect Paul’s depiction of the Athenians in Acts 17:22-23. To the Athenians, all religions were equally good, so they put up an altar and made sacrifices to every god they ever heard of. In fact, just to make sure that had all the bases covered, they had an altar inscribed “To an unknown god” in case they missed one. As far as the Athenians were concerned, Zeus was the same as Janus was the same as Isis was the same as whoever.

Today, we see a similar sentiment reflected in the saying, “Worship at the church of your choice.” Most people believe that yes, there are different churches, but those churches are only different because of personal preference. As a result, everyone is free to assemble with the church they prefer. It wouldn’t even cross their minds that not all churches are equally pleasing to God, or that we can determine which churches are pleasing and which aren’t by comparing them to His word. As a result, when we come in saying, “You need to leave your church and come and worship with my church,” we’re speaking a totally different language. In fact, they may well get offended. It’s like we insulted their dog or something. Until we get them to accept that there are good and bad churches, we won’t get anywhere.

Study Perspectives.

After this, we get to the really crucial ideas. At this point, we need to see that most others would say, **“I HAVE TO TRUST MY TEACHER.”** They have to echo the words of the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8:30-31. Without someone to guide them, how can they understand? It’s like my situation with cars. Let me tell you, friends, I am not a car guy. When something in one of my cars isn’t working, I don’t have the first clue on how to fix it. When I turn it over to a mechanic, I’m totally at his mercy. If he’s a crook, he can scam me, and I couldn’t tell the difference. That makes me very, very reluctant to take my car in unless I have some other reason to trust the guy first.

That’s where most people are when it comes to religion. They’re just as ignorant about the Bible as I am about cars. Somebody with even a little bit of Scriptural knowledge can deceive them all day, and they don’t know the first thing about it. They don’t even know enough about the word to tell that a Christian who’s teaching them the truth isn’t just cherry-picking the passages that support our position. We absolutely want to teach them out of that ignorance, but for us even to get the chance to do that, they have to trust us. Without that trust, they won’t even let us in through the door.

Once again, even if they aren’t able to articulate this, they certainly feel it, and that’s why they would also say to us, **“I NEED TO SEE PROOF THAT YOU’RE FROM GOD.”** This proof is what made Philip the evangelist so effective in his work in Samaria in Acts 8:5-6. The combination of word and attesting miracle was what saved souls.

Today, of course, the time of miracles has long since passed, but people still need proof from us. They need some reason to believe that we are the ones with the right answers and all the others aren’t. They need some reason to trust us. We can’t give them that reason through a miraculous work of the Holy Spirit, but we can show them the Holy Spirit at work in our lives. When our speech is different and more righteous, we give them proof. When we abstain from wicked recreations, we give them proof. When we are unfailingly kind to everyone around us, we give them proof. When we help them however they need help, when we’re there for them when they need us, we give them proof. When they accept that we are truly walking in the footsteps of Jesus, that’s when they’ll give us the license to preach the gospel of Jesus. If they can’t see Jesus in us, or we haven’t given them opportunity yet, forget it. They’ll never listen.

Finally, although hardly anyone will own up to this, most people believe, **“YOU CAN’T WIN AN ARGUMENT WITH ME.”** Look what happened to Stephen in Acts 6:9-11. This one group of Jews starts arguing with him, he plainly shows them that they’re wrong, but instead of believing, they bring a false accusation instead.

Once we begin arguing with an outsider, he’s going to be every bit as resistant to the gospel, even if he has to be irrational to do it. The problem is that once we get into that debate zone, instead of being a friend who’s trying to help him to the Lord, we become an enemy who has to be defeated. He doesn’t want to admit defeat, so he will never acknowledge that our points have merit. Once we sense someone’s heart hardening like this, we’re far better off changing the subject, because from that point on, the more we push, the more we increase his resistance to the gospel.