

Engaging with different cultures

“But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people.’”

Luke 2:10 (NIV)

Outline of talk by Felix Aremo

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Below is an outline of what the talk covers. Please see the corresponding session guide for more guidance on structuring the rest of the training session.

The cross-cultural reach of the Gospel

- Paul in Athens (Acts 17)
- Cross-cultural gospel presentation
- Translation

Three qualities to cultivate

- Quality 1 - Humility
- Quality 2 - Patience
- Quality 3 - Courage

Mixed results

Transcript of talk by Felix Aremo

You are free to use and adapt the content of this talk to suit your context.

Theme parks are great fun, but for the best rides, there are sometimes restrictions. If you're too short or too young, you're not allowed on. Now, imagine if Christianity had restrictions like that. Not to do with height or age, but imagine if Christianity had the sort of barriers found in other religions. Imagine if you had to learn ancient languages in order to hear the words of Jesus. Imagine if you had to travel to Jerusalem or Bethlehem in order to meet any Christians. Imagine if Christianity was like a kind of secret society where to know God, you had to be part of some elite social group, well educated, well connected, wealthy.

Hopefully, you're finding it really difficult to imagine Christianity in that way, because we know that from the very beginning, the gospel of Jesus was announced as good news of great joy for all the people. It was for the poor and rich, for women and men, for elders and children. In fact, when Paul wrote to the Corinthians, he was able to say something like this, "When God called you, very few of you were well-educated, influential upper-class." I'm paraphrasing 1 Corinthians 1:26.

One of the big surprises for the first followers of Jesus was that the good news of Jesus was for non-Jews as well as for Jews. It was for people from every nation, ethnic group, and language. In

Engaging with different cultures

the book of Acts. Jesus tells his followers that they will be empowered by the Holy Spirit to bear witness to the truth about him. Rather than wait for the peoples to come to them, they were to move out from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria carrying the good news to the ends of the earth. Which makes sense because the good news of Jesus is for all people.

In Acts, we see believers sharing the good news to all sorts of people, overcoming the language barriers and cultural barriers for people to receive the message. As a result, many came to believe in Jesus. There was a government official from east Africa, an Asian businesswoman, a Roman centurion and his household, a Greek prison warden and his family.

A great example of the cross-cultural reach of the gospel is found in Acts 17, when Paul is in Athens. While Paul was waiting for his friends, he couldn't help but notice all the temple statues and religious images which filled the city. He saw that the people of Athens were captivated by false gods, and he was so deeply distressed that he couldn't help himself. He had to find a way to share the good news of Jesus with them.

Notice that Paul engaged socially with all sorts of different people in all sorts of different places. Consider religion. They were a mixed crowd with a range of religious beliefs. There were Jews and Greeks who believed in one God, ordinary people in the marketplace who believed in many gods, philosophers who believed that god was detached and distant. They were also very different socially. Some were wealthy, others were poor. Some were skilled workers, others were highly educated intellectuals. Yet Paul took the opportunity to speak to all of them, whoever happened to be in the marketplace that day.

But when Paul spoke of Jesus, as the risen Lord, the people didn't understand him. He wasn't really connecting. As he explained the gospel, it's possible that they thought he was speaking about two new gods — one called Jesus, the other called resurrection. I can imagine Paul taking a deep breath and thinking to himself, "Okay, let me back up and try again."

As he sought to lead people to Christ, Paul had lost them along the way. So he had to retrace his steps and find better ways to communicate the good news. He needed to build on the areas of shared understanding. We sometimes call this pre-evangelism, establishing a framework in which the Christian message makes sense. It's the time when we deal with objections and clear up misunderstandings. We do this so that by the time we start speaking about Jesus, the message we share is understood and can be received as good news.

Okay, let's think about Paul's cross-cultural gospel presentation. Paul is invited to speak to the city council for Athens, the Areopagus. Notice how Paul bridges the cultural and religious gap between himself and his hearers.

Paul said to them, "I see you're very religious." Now, he isn't flattering them or criticising them. Paul's simply saying what he's seen. "I noticed religion is very important to you, but I also noticed that you admit you're ignorant about God. You have an altar to an unknown God. Okay, so let me introduce you to the God you're ignorant about." And that's what Paul goes on to do.

Because the people of Athens have such a distorted idea about who God is, Paul has to introduce them to the God of the Bible. Paul speaks of God as a relational God, the creator, sustainer, ruler, and judge. As he speaks to the philosophers, Paul uses language and concepts they were familiar with, and he corrects their wrong ideas about God. He even quotes two Greek poets, the lyrical

Engaging with different cultures

celebrities of the time. It's a bit like quoting from Ed Sheeran or Beyonce today. But it's not a gimmick or publicity stunt. Paul knows and respects the culture enough to know who to quote and he uses their lyrics to show that even within their own culture and myths, they've made true statements which can help them come to know what God is like.

A good word to describe what Paul is doing is translation. Now we often think of translation as moving words from one language to a different language, but Paul's not just translating words. Translation helped Paul to understand some of the ideas, symbols, and stories which shape Athenian culture. This meant that what he wanted to say was understood properly and his words had their intended impact.

One Gambian historian describes Christianity as a translated and translatable religion. Translation is one of the reasons Christianity has been able to spread so effectively over the past 2000 years. The truth of the gospel is so universal, it can be expressed using the language and cultures of distinct local people. God's truth is so universal that it's inherently translatable. That's why Jesus instructs his followers to go from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria the ends of the earth.

If you're a Christian today, a long line of people translated the gospel into words and ideas you could grasp. Someone brought the gospel to your country. Someone translated the Bible into your language. Someone communicated the gospel using language and concepts you could understand. That process of translation is just as needed today. Paul communicated wisely, and we need to learn to do the same. The people around us need the truth of Jesus and the concept of the gospel communicated to them in everyday language by everyday people like you and me. Otherwise, Christianity will seem like some exclusive club — all right for people like them, but not for people like me.

How can we become gospel translators? Here are three qualities we need to prayerfully cultivate. We need to be humble, patient, and courageous. Number one, we need to be humble. In order to share the gospel cross-culturally, we need to get to know people well — how they see themselves, how they see the world, what they think of Jesus and Christians. That requires humility. It requires the humility to listen carefully to people, to appreciate aspects of their culture, to ask questions about things we see. We don't have to become an expert in their culture before we begin talking about Jesus or sharing the gospel, but we do need the humility to listen, learn, and slowly get better at sharing the gospel in ways that will be understood, all the time praying that the Holy Spirit gives us the words to say.

I highlight the importance of humility because an arrogant person assumes that if there's been a misunderstanding, the problem lies with the other person and not with themselves. An arrogant person refuses to depart from their memorised script. They assume that everyone is like them or ought to be, and so they think that the third way of explaining the gospel is the best way. But that wasn't Paul's attitude. As great a communicator as he was, Paul knew when he had to pause, rewind, and try again in order to make Jesus known to the people of Athens, and we should do the same. Where do our explanations of the gospel meet with misunderstanding? Do the people we're talking to know what we mean when we say God, sin, judgment, salvation? If not, how can we explain these words using concepts or stories which resonate with them? Humility is necessary in this. Without humility, we simply won't see the need to change how we say things in order to help others to understand.

Engaging with different cultures

Secondly, you will need to be patient. Good communication takes time because getting to know people takes time. Good communication takes time because we won't be able to say everything that needs to be said in one go.

One very patient youth worker met with me once a week for over a year to read the Bible and to explain the gospel to me. I was a teenager who went to church, but my conception of God was completely wrong. I thought of God as a distant judge. I didn't know he was a loving father who wanted me to know him. I was scared that God would punish me for the many times I broke his rules. I didn't realise that Jesus had already paid my debt, pardoned my guilt, taken my punishment, and removed my shame when he died on the cross. All these things had to be carefully explained to me repeatedly over time. That youth worker had to be incredibly patient with me and I'm so grateful that he was. Eventually, I began to trust in Jesus rather than in myself. The patient hours invested in me were not wasted. Who do you need to be patient with? Who could you carefully share the gospel with bit by bit, day by day and maybe even year by year?

Thirdly, we must be courageous. In Athens, Paul didn't pull any punches when he had hard things to say. He began his speech with observations. "I see you're very religious. I found an altar to an unknown God." He moves on to tell them about God and quotes their poets in the process. But listen to how Paul ends his speech. Paul was saying that they no longer had any excuse for their ignorance about God. He was saying they needed to respond to the message he was now sharing. To say this, Paul needed courage, and so do we.

Once we get to know people and have found ways to translate the gospel effectively, at some point, we're going to need to say hard things. We'll need to show them how their existing beliefs contradict the gospel and we'll need to show them the claims Jesus makes and how they need to respond. We'll need to have the courage to say things the people we're speaking with may find challenging, offensive, or hard to accept.

A person who requires insulin doesn't just swab the drug on the surface of their skin, and it's no good injecting them with something plain like saline solution. You need the two together, the needle and the insulin. It's the same as we seek to share the gospel cross-culturally. If we don't translate enough, it's like squirting insulin on their skin. The gospel message isn't understood, so it won't reach their hearts. But if we fail to translate the whole message, holding back on hard truths, it's like injecting saline solution. The gospel message has been so diluted, it won't do any good. Gospel translators do both. They communicate the message in ways which resonate with their hearers, but they also communicate the challenge of the message so that their hearers realise they need to respond to Jesus.

As we finish, let's think about the impacts of Paul's efforts. Acts 17 records what happened as a result of Paul's gospel translation in Athens. The whole of Athens is converted. No, not really. In all honesty, the result was mixed.

People were saved, praise God. But not everyone, and the same will be true for us. We'll have mixed results, but let's make sure that the only barrier preventing people believing in Jesus has to do with the gospel itself, not misunderstandings or other cultural barriers.

If you're a Christian today, someone somewhere translated the gospel into language and concepts you could understand.

Engaging with different cultures

I'm super grateful for those who played that role of gospel translator in my life. May God enable you to be a gospel translator for others in your life too.

The training video is available for anyone to watch at apassionforlife.org.uk/fw7-view