



## Reference the Culture to Share God's Love - Paul

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### Introduction:

What one of us doesn't want to thrive spiritually? We especially want to thrive when it comes to making a difference in someone's life who doesn't believe in Christ. Where do we start? We start where Paul did, with a concern for lost people that says, with God's help I'm going to find a way to reach them.

Billy Graham began his ministry in the early 1940's as a graduate from Wheaton College and accepted a call to a small Baptist church in Western Springs, a small suburb of Chicago. Even though he felt his gifts were in the area of evangelism, he agreed to give it a go. Within several months, his church was growing and so was his popularity. He agreed to begin speaking on a program called "Songs in the Night". The program attracted an increased number of listeners.

He knew that there were a number of seekers and atheists listening because the program was aired on secular radio. So he engaged the wider spectrum of listeners by making sure that he referenced the culture.

He built his talks around the events of the day. Keeping up with current events through newspapers and radio news programs, he started each message with a reference to something people would have been hearing and talking about that very day. Then he moved into a Biblical message, showing that God and the scriptures are relevant to every problem.

Billy Graham's approach to communicating the gospel is not unique to him. If you look at Acts 17, you will see that Paul used the same technique. As we look at the scripture this morning, three things emerge about Paul's approach.

### Acts 17:22-23

**Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: "Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you."**

#### I. Paul was attentive – ACTS 17:16-23

Paul was not oblivious to the spiritual darkness of the first century Greek culture. He was deeply troubled

by what he saw as he walked the streets of Athens. There were too many idols, and too few indicators of purity and morality.

Paul began with inner turmoil at the outward display of false religion. This was the spring board that caused him to get involved. So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there.

Not put off by the very obvious spiritual needs around him in the culture of Athens, Paul did what he could to engage the people. That is the first principle

we see about effective personal evangelism. He did not despair over the conditions around him. He thanked God for the soil in which to scatter seed. Instead of distancing himself from those who were godless, and bemoaning that fact, he celebrated spiritual hunger and thirst.

Paul commended their religious fervor after he carefully observed the culture of their city. Starting with a common denominator – god, he began spending time with the most receptive listeners he could find. He didn't scatter seed indiscriminately. He purposely focused his time and energy on individuals who were more apt to speak his language.

The Jews and God-fearing Greeks were monotheistic. Paul's God was their God. They didn't understand that only Jesus could bring them into a personal relationship with him but they didn't worship the Greek idols. In addition they affirmed the Old Testament as the Word of God. So Paul had a starting point.

It was similar to those who were lapsed churchgoers. You don't have to define terms, and chances are there are some who have been turned off to traditional Christianity that are at a needy point in their life and ready to reconsider claims of Christ.

When Paul was surrounded by a crowd of disinterested listeners, he called attention to the Athenian's spiritual sensitivity as a means of affirming his audience. He made a very positive reference to something of which they were aware.

To apply this to our lives, we need to be listening to the culture around us. We need to listen to the political debates. We need to listen to what people are saying about Terri Schivo's situation, and the decision that the Colorado Supreme court made this last week because a Bible was brought into the courtroom.

Look for something in their world you can commend, rather than beginning with something to be condemned. Start where people are in their thinking, not where they are not.

## **II. Paul was responsive – ACTS 17:24-28**

Paul started with their familiar altar to the unknown god. He begins to tell them of this God who is the creator of the universe, the sustainer of life, and sovereign over all nations.

I see that in every way you are very religious. I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship and I found an altar with this inscription "TO THE UNKNOWN GOD". Paul also quoted from a couple of the Greeks' revered poets. He did this to spark their interest and get them to listen to what he had to say.

He did not criticize or put them down. He did not mock their spiritual ignorance or judge them, but he complimented them. The result was that there were converts. Paul's strategy here was earning the right to be heard. If you build authentic relationships you will gain the privilege to be heard.

Being responsive includes using words and ideas that are part of their vocabulary as a platform for presenting the gospel. Remember it is your goal to be a bridge builder, not a wall builder.

One of the great failings of the church is that it asks the broader culture to understand its language. This post-Christian culture has no working literacy in the Bible, nor does it comprehend such theological terms as "redeemed, saved, washed in the blood, or sanctified." Do we wonder why we feel we are speaking a foreign language when we try to share the roots of faith? For most in our culture, we are unintelligible.

Here is the good news. The areas of business, science, government, literature, leisure and entertainment, all have analogies, metaphors and comparisons. These can lead to serious discussions of faith and values and eventually, Christian meaning. We who are followers of Christ, like Jesus Himself, can learn to reference the culture to share His love.

What network programs are on TV? You and I may not make a habit of watching them, but you better believe most of the people where you work do. What novels are your neighbors reading? You may not personally read those novels, but if you know your neighbors are big fans of that literature you could familiarize yourself somehow with their work.

Think about non-Christians in your circle of relationships. What are their areas of interest? Do they like sports, books, movies, music, magazines, websites, television, news stories? Look for ways to use those positive remarks in conversations with unbelievers this week.

Instead of putting down the icons of our culture, use those icons to draw them into a conversation about God. Point them to the God who is near.

[Acts 17:31-32](#)

**For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead. When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, "We want to hear you again on this subject."**

### III. Paul was bold – ACTS 17:29-34

Paul wasn't afraid to talk about the "r" word – religion. While some people he talked to sneered, others believed.

Paul was confident in who God was, and who He was in God. He was confident in building a bridge, because he had studied the writings of the philosophers of the day. In that way, he was knowledgeable and was able to communicate with boldness the need these people had in their lives for the true God.

While it is true we are looking for common ground and want to be as positive as possible, not everyone is going to accept or applaud the gospel. Some will believe while others will not. Some will sneer, others will believe. People don't care how much you know till they know how much you care.

We are to embrace the world and each day with confidence and courage. Be certain that the Lord wants to use us to illuminate and savor our society. Paul is not an example of one cowering in the corner, or threatened by the godless or immoral influences on every street corner. He models for us what it means

#### **Conclusion:**

Remember, we are aliens and strangers on the way to a much better world. In the meantime, our mandate from God is to live in a way that brings light to the darkness, justice to corrupting systems, compassion and mercy to circumstances of uncompromising neglect and cruelty.

Let us begin this enormous task, which few Christians seem to accomplish well, by affirming what is good in our culture. In order to succeed, we are going to have to learn its language and then translate the meanings of Christianity into that language. What is the language of our culture? It is multifold: the language of business, the language of science, the language of government, the language of literature, the language of leisure and entertainment.....

Please join me in prayer. Lord Jesus, we live in a world that still worships an unknown God. This is sad, because it's only through You, Jesus, that we can thrive spiritually. Rather than being critical, help us to talk about matters

to thrive spiritually by shaking hands with cultural icons *without bending the knee to pagan idols.*

Paul referenced the culture and engaged the Greek intellectuals in Athens by affirming their interest in religion and referencing some of their own poets. Complimenting the culture is a way to gain a hearing in our post-Christian world, by making positive comments about current events and ideas. It is one of the most underutilized means of establishing credibility among those we hope to influence for Christ. For believers who are accustomed to being critical of secular books, movies, thought, and so on, this exercise may take some getting used to.

Think of some way to say something positive about an aspect of our culture that is important to them. You might even be able to think of a way to build a bridge from that compliment to a core value of our faith.

Do you realize that Christianity has been bypassed by Islam in terms of conversion and growth rate? We live in a post-Christian culture, and our message about Jesus being the ONLY way to God is not a popular one. We have our work cut out for us.

When you celebrate what other people value, they will value what you have to say. Paul and Billy Graham are great examples of individuals who have done this well. Let's learn to compliment the culture in order to open up conversations about Christ. And incidentally, Jesus used the very same technique.

I believe that before this week is over, some of us will also be talking with someone about Jesus and perhaps they will become a believer in Christ as well.

of the soul in a gentle and respectful manner. Like Paul, help us to reference the culture to share your message of love. AMEN.