Reaching a New Generation with an Old Gospel

* Adapted from and added to “Reaching Students with the Gospel” by Lynn H. Pryor (HCSB; The Minister’s Bible)

Thought Question: The gospel never changes, but can how we present the gospel change?

Illustration: The Generation Gap

A father told his child the age-old story, “When I was your age, I had to walk 5 miles to school uphill both ways.” The grandfather one upped his son and said, “Oh yeah, “When I was your age, I had to walk 5 miles to school uphill both ways and we didn’t even have a school.”

Nowadays we old folks can say to our children, “When I was your age, I had to walk clear across the room the change channels.”

There have always been generation gaps. This is seen even in the “wisdom” of Rehoboam’s young and old advisers (1 Kings 12). Not always is the older generation right; but it is important to understand there are differences, especially in experiences and communication. How many older people prefer texting over verbal communication? Generational changes mean generational preferences.

The following suggestions help us connect to a new generation; but these are not “tricks”. They are sincere (a word I will emphasize throughout this lesson) methods used by sincere people to preach and teach the gospel.

Before going through the methods to reach a new generation, let’s look at some statistics dealing with the generations around us:

* 41% of Millennials believe it is wrong to evangelize.
* 71% of non-religious Millennials are not interested in “religion”.
* 23% of Millennials are “unaffiliated”.

Looking at those numbers are numbing, so we also need to mentally reverse them:

* 59% of Millennials believe it is right to evangelize.
* 29% of non-religious Millennials are interested in “religion”.
* 77% of Millennials are not “unaffiliated”.

As we go through the following list, keep asking yourself which ones you are good at and conversely which ones you have trouble with.

**1. Don’t Assume They Will Accept “Your” Definition of Truth**

First, notice that I put “your” in quotes; not that we have our own definition of truth, but rather that is how they will look at “your” truth.

A newer generation (and an older generation influenced by a different way of thinking) have been “baptized” by a new definition of truth found within a post-modern culture:

* *“What is true for you may not be true for me.”*
* *“Speak your truth into power.”*
* We even see it creeping into the church in ways that seem innocent: *“What does that passage mean to you?”*.

A post-modern generation can accept there are multiple “truths”, even contradictory “truths”. This is one of the distinct differences between Eastern religions and Judeo-Christian religion. Simply quoting scripture may not be enough, or even the place the start. This is because they do not accept scripture even if familiar with it; or might not even know enough about scripture to trust it.

Thankfully Scripture gives us help in assisting those who have this type of thinking. Compare, or more accurately contrast, Paul’s approaches in Acts 17:10-15 and 17:16-34. In the first Paul goes into a synagogue and the Bereans examined the Scriptures daily. Yet Paul preaching in Athens, on the Aeropagus, to Greek Philosophers who loved to hear something new is very different. So, Paul preached to them Jesus without using scripture, but instead using three things they are familiar with:

* Acknowledgement of something they had very little information on – the altar to the Unknown God
* Nature
* Poets (authorities they accept)

Looking for ways to find “truth” that you both can agree to is important.

**2. Listen to Their Story**

Do this by listening more than talking. Ask questions. This is not an interview, but a way to show genuine interest in them. Notice I said “genuine.” Faking sincerity is unfortunately sincerely easy! As you talk to them, you will find what makes them tick, what their interests are. One way to do this is to pay attention.

One day doing campus evangelism, I saw a young man with a Tardis key chain. Dr. Who was my path to starting a discussion. That led to other forms of science fiction. Which finally led to a conversation of moral subjectivity and God.

Again, the Bible helps in this. Paul saw the idol to “The Unknown God.” Jesus used the story of the woman at the well, although he didn’t have to listen to her to discover it. In Mark 7:24-30 and Luke 18:35-43 we find Jesus doing something He often did – He listened to people.

**3. Don’t Be (Or At Least Don’t Act) Shocked by Their Stories**

The key word today is “tolerance.” Immediately being considered as “intolerant” will close down the conversation.

If you have been involved in “street evangelism”, you probably have heard pretty much everything. For me I have heard stories of murder, bestiality, drugs, homosexuality, molestation (both victims and perpetrators), and others. Remember “all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23).

The calling of Matthew and Zacchaeus works well here because both were pariahs in the eyes of others. Luke 7:36-50 is another time we see Jesus having a different reaction than the religious around him. In fact, His host was shocked – “This man, if he were a prophet, would know who and what kid of woman this is who is touching him – she’s a sinner!” (7:39).

**4. Tell Them Your Story**

They might want to argue against scripture as true, but they can’t – by their own philosophy of truth – argue against your story. Share your “testimony” (John 1:7-8).

Tell them of your struggles, how your life has changed in finding Jesus, what a difference Jesus makes in your life *right now.* Share what you have been willing – and thankfully so – to give up to follow Jesus. Your beliefs must be interwoven with the gospel story. The danger is giving emphasis to your story over the gospel, making it more about you than the God who is helping you.

As someone who has “been raised in the church” and been a “good Jewish boy” as they say, I don’t have the interesting story that others have whether they have been “raised in the church” or “raised in the wild by wolves!” Many Christians have “better” stories than I do, and by better I mean… “worse.” Drugs, sex, abuse, addiction, and so on.

I have used my own story to sincerely – and again I emphasize “sincerely” - make connections. I spoke to an addict of the time I accidentally got addicted to pain meds following a surgery. I’ve used my ill health such as waking up one morning and not being to walk – at age 5. I’ve used the times of doubt in my life: 1) Bell’s Palsy and wondering out loud to God how He could let this happen if He wanted me to preach; 2) How in college I was willing to give up Christianity all together because I thought I found the real truth and thinking Christianity was built upon a lie; 3) How in college another time I struggled in my belief whether or not God even existed.

I can also use “I am a recovering Pharisee” where I remember thinking about what I just said, “That’s not a good argument but it’s our argument”. Who had a more difficult time with Jesus: Tax collectors and sinners; or Pharisees and Sadducees?

Once again, the Bible helps us here. Paul, in Acts 22,26 and again in Galatians, “witnesses” or tells his story.

**5. Find Common Ground**

The Incarnation is about finding “common ground” (Hebrews 2:14-18; 4:16). We must continue by living an “incarnational life” (a 2nd incarnation although not literal), wherein the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit dwell in us (Jn.14:23-26).

Finding common ground is connected to allowing them to tell you their story. As with the above example of the student who loved Dr. Who, I was able to engage in an exchange of views. This was not faking it, this was connecting with them. The common ground might be family or tragedy. When telling the story of Jesus, you can interweave your shared story.

Paul does this twice by using two different languages that he spoke (Acts 21:37-22:5). He calls them “brothers” which identifies himself with them (22:1). He also says to the Jews, “I was zealous for God, just as all of you are today” (22:3)

**6. Take Time to Build a Real Relationship**

Consider this (what I consider a fact): “What objective truth is to the older generation; relationships are to the newer generation.” Why might this be true? Because relationships are something “true” to them since it is based upon experienced reality. Relationships are significant to the younger generation, maybe more so than in other generations. For example, the divorce rate among millennials is lower than the national average. Millennials also value volunteering and serving more than older generations. This easily moves into the gospel message since we are all to minister or serve.

Young people are flooded with sale pitches. The gospel is not a sales pitch wherein you profit from their buying. This takes a sincere effort. The more time spent together, the more they see in “real time” your character, your story, and THE truth.

This must be done before and after a conversion, the latter of which we see in Paul’s relationship with the Ephesian church (Acts 20:17-38). Jesus is the prime example being “the friend of sinners and tax collectors”. Read all the parables in Luke 15 under the guise of Jesus being accused of eating with “undesirables.”

**7. Be Real Yet Adapt**

All though this lesson I have emphasized being sincere. When encountering the world to share Jesus’s story with them, be real. Don’t feign interest in something, although you can share the experience with them due to your interest in them. Your openness and integrity are important to them. If you are not their age, don’t act their age. They need adults in their lives whether they admit it or know it.

Consider the real application of what Paul is saying in 1 Corinthians 9:19-27. Did Paul engage in activities that some Jews would consider sinful (but were not) in order to save others? Recast this into today. What would that look like for you? This is something “we” are not very good at because of the misinterpreted charge of “Stay away from the appearance of evil” (1 Thessalonians 5:22).

Caution: This takes wisdom, and self-awareness of one’s own weaknesses. Also, there is a difference in trying to fit in to benefit yourself versus trying to fit in to benefit Jesus.

**8. Avoid or Explain Churchy Language**

There is not a “one right way” to express the ideas in the Bible which is why many translations can differ in word choice and still teach the one right way.

Mark 7:11 explains a religious word – Corban. What many don’t realize is that the religious words of today were not religious words of “yesterday”. Recently I read of someone who complained that “congregation” was used instead of the good old fashioned word “church.” Also, there are probably some “big” or obsolete words we sing and read in our Bibles we don’t understand: Ebenezer, “night with ebon pinions”, propitiation vs expiation, and more.

If our main purpose of this exercise is to connect with a generation that is not familiar with the Bible and Biblical language, that includes the words we use:

Instead of Saying – You Could Say Something Like

* “church” – “congregation” or “family”
* “Receive Jesus” (John 1:12) – “I had Jesus take control of my life”
* Believe – “I believed what I heard and committed my life to following that truth”
* Faith – “I trust and know it to be true”
* Forgiven – “Jesus removed the guilt of all the wrong I had done”
* Lost – “Without hope”
* Christ – “God’s Chosen One to bring us to Him”
* Pray – “Just talk to God”
* Redeemed/Saved – “Jesus set me free from the way I have been living”
* Sacrifice/Atonement for sins – “Jesus paid the price for all the wrong I have done”
* Sin – Wrong actions, wrongs thoughts, rebellious attitude,

**9. All Along Look for When and How to Tell the Story of Jesus**

What you accept as a given, has to be proved to those for whom the Bible is a foreign (to their culture) experience. Whatever world-view someone has, there are some commonalities with the Christ Event (which ultimately is the entire Bible):

1. WHO is God if there is a god?
2. WHAT am I? (Are we different from animals? Are we immaterial in some sense?”)
3. WHEN did everything begin? (I am a Young Earth advocate but getting into a debate about when everything began is probably useless and counterproductive. The honest answer is “I don’t know.”)
4. WHERE did we come from and where are we going?
5. WHY are we here? (Millennials are very much about service to others)
6. HOW did the world get the way it is?

Use the Bible in answering these questions so that they understand your story is because of God’s story.

Jesus found a way in John 4 to bring the discussion around. There is one gospel, but there is not one right way to present that gospel. Mold the story to the benefit of your audience while being sincere in every way. Even in our methods, we must make sure the gospel is being taught. Just to review and reiterate, notice how each of the points above is illustrated in the gospel and evangelizing of and by Jesus. The gospel is not found in certain religious words, but in a certain Person – Jesus Christ.

1. Jesus is the definition of truth.
2. Jesus listened to their stories which is part of His success.
3. Jesus loved the socially outcast.
4. Jesus’s story must be take precedent over your story.
5. Jesus found common ground, so let’s not make excuses.
6. Jesus loved sinful people, and most amazing to me is, sinful people loved Jesus.
7. Jesus freely adapted to others because His purpose demanded it and He loved people.
8. Parables, or stories, are probably the least “churchy” communication one can use.
9. Jesus came to seek and save the lost and worked his goal into His daily life.