



Finding Faith Today

Acts 1:8, Luke 24:13-32

Since Christmas we have been exploring ideas along the theme “Same Gospel, New Ways” and hopefully have realised that even though the good news never changes, the way it gets delivered changes according to who we are delivering it to. Over the years we have come to doing things in a particular way and we need to realise that in terms of knowledge and culture, the society around us is very different to what it was even a few years ago.

I've introduced you to two ideas, firstly that it isn't novel for God to challenge His people to reach out to people who have ideas and ways alien to them and by His Spirit find a way of leading them to Christ and secondly that to do that, we have needed to develop new tools to help us understand and reach these people.

Before we get carried away looking for a crack formula to reach the modern generation, I preached on a passage last week that put reaching others for Christ into perspective. Philip was LED to the Ethiopian, who just happened by the grace and purposes of God to be rather perplexed about Isaiah 53. Because Philip listened and obeyed he got to lead the man to Christ using the knowledge he had and his experience of Jesus. Reaching out to others should be a work of the Spirit, but we also need to be prepared for whom God is going to lead us to, by having the knowledge and an experience of Jesus in our lives. It's really critical and you'll see the importance of it when we do something a bit more practical next week. So our preparation is in two ways

- praying and waking in the Spirit
- having knowledge and experience of Jesus in our lives.

Without either of these I suspect that we won't see too many people coming to Christ anywhere about us very soon. Failure to reap even if we've sowed with the best intentions usually is because we fail in one or both of these departments.

Tonight I'm going to hopefully not blind you with science but show you what eventually you'll find an obvious way of thinking how people come to Christ. It's not something that has come out of a vacuum or thought up by some clever person in a theological college. It came from people actually studying the testimonies of real Christians of a variety of ages and backgrounds and so what is going to follow has been based on how God has been dealing with real people. If you want to know what God is doing in our generation – then just look! Examine it in the light of His Word. Listen to the Spirit. And then go with the flow. These studies come up with the same broad conclusions about finding faith in the 21st Century.

We can think that everybody embarks on a spiritual journey. That journey continues through life. Some people don't get very far, others do the distance. Sometimes the road, rather than being straight is rather tortuous. Our job as witnesses is to lead people along and help them get over the border and into Christ. Sometimes the journey is quick, sometimes a long time.

I also gave you a rather complicated table, Engel's Scale, to illustrate to you that in our generation, more people are further back along that road in our society than at any other time since the dark ages. And how we reach them is going to depend on how much they know and how much they have experienced of the spiritual, which may not be much.

Take a look at this (Pythagoras' Equation). I don't know what your maths is like. It's Pythagoras' Equation – the square on the hypotenuse of a right angled triangle is equal to the sum of the squares on the other two sides. It's a fundamental mathematical principle and underlies a huge part of modern science and technology. Now if it's a long time since you did Pythagoras, then let me give you a teacher's perspective.

Would you for example teach Pythagoras to a baby? No. You might teach it to walk or eat with a spoon or say Mum, but Pythagoras, no. What about this fine group of 8 or 9 year olds. Unless they are rare mathematical geniuses; no, You might be teaching them quite complicated maths stuff, like long division, fractions and even some geometry but Pythagoras – not quite yet.

But here are some teenagers. They will know about Pythagoras (hopefully). I learnt Pythagoras when I was 12.

It's obvious isn't it? To understand certain things, you've got to complete other things first. Some children get to Pythagoras faster than others. Bethan can tell you all about Pythagoras, but Michael never got that far.

It's the same with the gospel – which is actually easier to understand than Pythagoras. In this world, some people have got further than others and we need to bring Jesus to them in a manner appropriate to where they are – and then accompany them along the road as Jesus did to the men on the road to Emmaus until their eyes are open and realise who Jesus is. It may be a long one – it may be brief.

So here's our road again and I've simplified Mr Engels to these stages which I think helps us. We start with unbelief and to get to salvation, we must be aware of God (obvious really), but to receive salvation we must be aware of Jesus. Now knowing about Jesus isn't the same as trusting Him and salvation comes when people realise that they need to come to faith in Christ for themselves. That can take years, but the realisation they need to actually believe for themselves is often very sudden (but sometimes not!) – their eyes are opened and they believe.

In my own testimony, I was aware of God and Jesus very quickly as I came from a Christian family. By the time I was 9 or 10 I had been given a very clear idea of what I should do in terms of trusting Jesus. I actually didn't realise that until I was 10 and went to an adult evangelistic service where things were explained a different way and bang(!) that was it!

So on this road to enlightenment we will meet people at various stages, and how we minister to them depends where they're at. Now before I go any further I want to stress something. The purpose of Christian mission is to bring people to Christ. That is their real need. It's an eternal need. Without Christ they are lost. They do go to hell. Let's be real about that. Our goal is to bring them to Christ. I say that, because along the way we will find that getting them there often involves ministering to their immediate needs (sometimes called their felt needs). That's all part of bringing Jesus to them, but as a Christian, it can never be an end in itself. When it does – and it certainly can do – then not too many people are likely to become Christians. In the end, there is no alternative to telling people and part of our accompanying people on their journey is to bring them to a point that they will understand as we do tell them.

Let's be more specific:

Level 1 We meet people somewhere between complete unbelief and some idea of God. This is where many people are today – with a wishy washy idea of God and a deep suspicion of religious people. How do we start to reach them – by showing them that we're OK. We're normal, just like them, but that we've got a care for them because of the fact that we are Christians. People trust you if you genuinely show friendship to them. To accept them for who they are. How will people ever know God is real? Because they see Him in us.

Level 2 Friendship is a wonderful thing. If we really bring Christ to them; if they can see we are OK, it isn't

difficult to present Jesus to them. Usually we are needing at this stage to be introducing the fact that it's OK to trust Christ. It's normal. People really do need to have a genuine awareness of Jesus before they can be brought to faith. Sometimes they come along quickly, sometimes not. I say that because in practice there's a temptation to blaze guns at people that really need issues dealing with and questions answered rather than be preached at. More flies are caught using honey than with a rolled up newspaper!

Level 3 Bringing people to faith. This is the level at which traditional methods of mission will work. Alpha courses, evangelistic stuff, inviting people to church. But until people get to this point, no amount of inviting is ever going to get you anywhere. We're lucky here – we do have contacts at this level who will come and we need to examine the way in which we are trying to reap them – one size does not fit all and some of these folks have issues that need dealing with – usually sin-related that prevent them coming to Christ.

If you've ever wondered why people don't respond to invitations to Alpha or services, it's because they are Level 1 or Level 2 – they're not ready for it. Yet most of our traditional mission activities are Level 3 so all we do is try to answer questions people aren't asking, in a way they don't understand in order to lead them to a faith they don't want (yet). We're trying to teach babies Pythagoras!

Level 4 – is all about leading people into faith – discipleship and all that, which good mission churches usually fail lamentably at but we'll get to that when we do.

So here we have it, four levels of mission that reflect where people are in our society today. The levels help us understand where people we meet are at, and give us some idea what we should do, both individually and as a church. What you're trying to tell them depends on where they are.

What this does tell us though is that in order to be effective in mission is that we have to start them where they are and lead them to where they need to go. Therefore in our mission as a church, we need to have available to us the means by which we can take people from one level to the other. At the moment we do some good level 1 stuff, rarely do any level 2 at all and do level 3 stuff. There's nothing to progress people with. Actually in terms of personal witness, we don't know how to progress people either. We do a lot of sowing, but actually, the crop is never ripe enough to reap.

On purely organizational level, let me show you how that would work for a Family Ministry. We don't have one of these, but I would certainly like to try it!

Level 1 – Family fun activities. Purely social. Development of friendships informally. 6-8 a year. Family Fun Days, games evenings, puppet shows, BBQ, beach party.

Level 2 – Similar kind of activity but with Christian input – which is made clear on advertising 2-3 a year. Jim Bailey, Christian magician, Christian band

Level 3 – Overtly evangelistic – All-Age services, Christmas services,

And there you have a route of progression. Lots of people come to Level 1, fewer to 2 and even fewer to 3 but actually we are progressing people all the time because it is a regular cycle. So therefore we need to move to a kind of mission that systematically gives opportunity for us to minister as a church to people at any level almost at any time and gives us opportunity to progress them up the levels as a result. It's something that demands prayer, thought and organisation over and above anything we've done before. We have most of the elements in place rather like having a collection of notes – but we need to put them together to play the tune!

Now is that obvious? Yes. We are developing and maintaining contact with people whilst at the same time being able to maintain our friendships and their interest in finding more out about the gospel. The same thinking that we've applied to church can apply to our personal relationships too, as we shall see next week.

All, I've done is give us a framework for the obvious. It's just that we don't actually do the obvious in practice and we need to move there. Next week I'm going to recap on this and then what we're going to do is have a workshop where we can pool ideas as to ways in which we can open effective routes to lead

people to Jesus in other areas of our Christian lives and in the ministries of the church.

*Preached by Mark Reid
MRBC Felixstowe 3/2/08
© Mark Reid 2008
Scripture Quotes TEV*