



Workshop **Acts 11:19-26**

Last week we looked at the way in which people come to faith in the 21st Century and found that even though the Gospel hasn't changed, and the way in which people are enlightened hasn't changed either – it's through the work of the Holy Spirit – changes in our culture mean that there is a large proportion of our population who are unchurched. This means that in contrast to 30 years ago or earlier, we can't assume that people know much of God or the Gospel. What they would have learnt in Sunday School or even school years ago, just doesn't happen now and we must bear that in mind as we try to engage people with the gospel.

What I tried to explore with you is a way of understanding how the journey to faith happens and how we might tap into that to bring people to Christ. The levels scheme I gave you is a modern tool and it's based on people's testimonies and is useful for just that. We are not the first people to have looked for ways to try and sum up how the Holy Spirit is working. Barnabas found himself in the same situation in Antioch. As Peter was learning how Gentiles could be saved without becoming Jewish proselytes, as he met Cornelius, news came from Antioch that there was a whole church full of gentile converts at Antioch. Cornelius wasn't a one-off. Interestingly the Apostles sent Barnabas, a Cypriot Jew. Why? Because unlike the Galilean and Judean Jews who made up the bulk of the church, he understood the Gentile situation. It was an inspired choice. When he arrived he didn't default to his Jewish prejudice, but saw what the Holy Spirit was doing and rejoiced.

But he had a problem. You see, no-one had ever taught Gentiles the things of God from scratch. Jews knew all about God from birth. It was programmed into them, taught in the synagogue and part of their culture. These people had learned about Jesus first. How on earth do you teach Gentiles the things of God? No-one had ever done it. No-one had ever looked into the Scriptures and made any sense how Gentiles could come to faith.

What Barnabas needed was someone who had real understanding of the scriptures, was a theologian and understood the Gentile mind. Peter, John and James the brother of Jesus were all good blokes, but they were still struggling with the idea of Gentiles being saved, not trying to work out the theology of salvation. Who was there who had the mind and the skill to make sense of it. There was only one man. Not one of the original disciples, not one of the inner circle, but a learned Jewish convert who had studied theology with the best of Jewish teachers, had a miraculous conversion and who knew Greek culture and had a love of Cretan poets amongst his interests. That was Saul of Tarsus. The rest as they say is history. Look at the NT and you see a large chunk written by Paul. Why because it was the learned Paul who God used to show how our faith in Christ was the fulfillment of what God had revealed since the beginning and through the OT. Our understanding of church and being church comes from Paul.

In every generation we need to recognise two things – that God never changes, the Gospel never changes, the Word of God never changes – but that because people and society change, we need to walk in the Spirit, pray in the Spirit and see what the Spirit is doing as He brings people to Christ. As we understand that – we too can participate in reaping the harvest. It's no point trying to reap if the combine harvester has moved down the road. We need to follow it.

That's some background to this piece of thinking. Unlike Paul, it isn't scripture, just a tool. It's up to use to make sure that if we use it, that we are scriptural and in the Spirit when we try to use something like this. In the end this isn't an intellectual exercise or a game. It's exploring how we rescue real people who are headed for a real hell.

Let me recap. People are on a journey and these days, many start without being really convinced that there is a God and without any conviction that we are sensible and trustworthy people to help them. It wasn't helped this week with the Archbishop of Canterbury's remarks and the response to it. Where is our credibility? It's in tatters.

So one of the most basic things we need to do is to convince people we are OK. That we are trustworthy. They are not going to trust what we communicate with them unless we are credible. That's the nature of Level 1. In fact people being able to trust us is part of successful witnessing at any level.

Befriending enables us to progress people along the journey. The purpose of studying the journey is so as we can help people walk along it and we will know where to move people to next. So we introduce Jesus. For people again it is a voyage of discovery. They can't do Pythagoras unless they understand elementary maths first. Similarly with people, their knowledge of Jesus can be a voyage of discovery. Some go through it fast, others incredibly slowly – all just as the Spirit moves.

Eventually we get to level 3 in which we ready people to accept Christ. Level 4 is where we're at. We have faith, so now we begin to grow in it.

As I said last week, in the past everybody learnt travelled through levels 1 and 2 naturally. Now we have to do something we have never done before – bring people through a level of enlightenment about God and the things of God which comes naturally to most of us.

It's important because much of the evangelistic mission of our church (and most churches) is usually with Level 3 language and understanding and we wonder why people with a Level 1 understanding don't respond.

We perceive the problem, but mission that lets us contact the community in a non-threatening way can also be ineffective if we do not have a strategy to progress people in their journey to level 2 and above.

Last week I gave you a strategy for starting a ministry to bring the Good News to families – as a family unit. I believe in trying aim at what you're trying to shoot. Therefore if you want families, go for them – not just their children.

Level 1 Social events for all the family

Level 2 Similar but with a Christian message

Level 3 Family based activities – family house group or all-age services

Level 4 – conventional church

Men's Ministry

Level 1 – social activities

Level 2 – Social plus Christian

Level 3 – courses, invite to church

Level 4 - conventional

The same kind of thinking underlies how we reach people in any context. We work on the basis of finding out where they are on the journey and walk them through towards Christ – just as the Spirit prompts us.

Workshop – suggest how you might move the following towards Christ – what sort of thing in each level

An unchurched neighbour who seems quite friendly

Non-Christians with whom your house group has contact with.

Feedback – what about our preparation as believers?

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