

Evangelism in Church Gatherings

If in our churches 'evangelistic' meetings, and 'evangelistic' sermons, are thought of as special occasions, different from the ordinary run of things, it is a damning indictment of our normal Sunday services ... that would simply prove that we have failed to understand what our regular Sunday services are for.

Jim Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*, p 55

What should we expect of our church gathering?

Christians have different Ideas about what the church gathering is.

Church is the gathering of Christians

Places like Ephesians chapters 1 and 3 tell us that the new relationship of Jews and Gentiles gathered spiritually around Christ is represented and worked out, we might say manifested, through the gathering of those same believers on earth.

That is to say, when God's people gather on earth it's a visible manifestation of the gathering that is already taking place in heaven.

Church is a gathering of which non-Christians will be a part

The Bible also anticipates there will be unbelievers among the gathered people of God. Take 1 Corinthians 14:23 – 24, for example, where Paul speaks of this exact occurrence, saying, "if an unbeliever or an inquirer comes in." And let's not forget the Old Testament examples of the alien among the gathered church of Israel.

I don't really want to spend time arguing the balance of those two but at the very least, our evangelical convictions will compel us to look for opportunities to promote the gospel, even in our Sunday gatherings!

So, let's think about our topic under 2 broad headings:

1) Making church gatherings "seeker comprehensible."

Part of promoting the gospel in our gatherings is making sure what happens in the gathering does actually promote the gospel among those who need to hear it. I'm not saying that only non-Christians need to hear the gospel, but if they don't understand it, the gospel isn't being promoted!

2) Creating deliberate opportunities to explain aspects of the gospel of Jesus in the gathering.

Where are the particular opportunities to communicate something of the good news of Jesus in part of what we already do in our gathering?

1) How do we make church “seeker omprehensible”?

Some of you will know the Seeker Sensitive movement. Broadly speaking sought to remove or reduce elements that were considered foreign to non-Christians; Congregational singing, taking holy communion, extended times of prayer, corporate responses & readings, etc.

I want to suggest a different model, “seeker comprehensible,” which I acknowledge isn’t as slick sounding as Seeker Sensitive! I thought I had coined this new term and then some years later read it in a book, which was most disappointing!

The goal here is not necessarily to remove or even reduce things that are foreign to non-Christians. Some things Christians do when they gather are really important, even though they are totally foreign! Think of using the Scriptures to shape your prayers! That’s strange for people who aren’t Christians, as is sharing the Lord’s supper! But I reckon these are things that all of us think we should be doing when we gather as God’s people!

The challenge then, is to make what we do comprehensible or accessible to people who are unfamiliar with Christian things (not to mention anyone who’s joined us from a different church tradition). As I go on in ministry, I’m more and more determined to do this in fewer and fewer words!

High Context Culture vs Low Context Culture

Anthropologist Edward T. Hall identified the distinction between high context cultures and low context cultures. This work was initially in 1959, and then in his book “Beyond Culture” (1976).

The distinction is about how a culture communicates. Does it use high context messages or low context message?

In a high context environment, less is said, and an understanding of the culture is required to explain or fill in the gaps. In a low context culture, much more is spelt out explicitly, so a prior understanding of the culture isn’t necessary to understand what is happening or being asked.

Significantly, Hall noted that “culture is often subconscious,” we don’t deliberately create it, nor are we necessarily aware of it unless we go looking.

In a high context culture, someone needs to be on the “inside” in order to know what’s going on. In a low context culture, someone can take part in and benefit from the culture, the first time they engage with it. Think of a major international airport; its whole existence is premised upon first time users being able to access and utilise every aspect of it. So a lot of careful thought is given to how to communicate.

Since churches generally drift toward complexity as they grow, it's easy for churches to develop a high context culture in which only those with the "inside knowledge" can understand and appreciate what is going on. This includes everything from our language, signage, job titles, group names, how we refer to elements in the service, etc.

Think about what happens in a church gathering

1. What are the elements that make up our regular church gathering?
2. Which of these are foreign or strange to a newcomer or non-Christian?
3. Can we either do away with or change the way we do these things, in order to aid understanding & and participation?
4. Why are we often reluctant to make these changes for the sake of newcomers and non-Christians?

Activity: **Choose an element of your church gathering that is likely to be foreign or strange to a non-Christian newcomer. How can you explain, introduce or shape it to be accessible to a non-Christian.**

2) How do we communicate something of the gospel of Jesus every time we gather?

If someone who doesn't know Jesus turns up on a Sunday, they should have the opportunity to hear what we're on about! And there will also be regular members who don't know the gospel and aren't Christians! Even if they think they do!

But I don't mean we need to try to explain every aspect of the gospel on every occasion!

When we were planning to plant our church, one of the things we did was make a list of all the opportunities we had in the Sunday gathering, where we could deliberately seek to communicate aspects of the gospel message.

What might be some of the points in the service where aspects of the gospel of Jesus can be deliberately communicated?

And how might we do this?

Activity with a team of leaders from your church: **Choose an element of a church gathering, how can you incorporate a deliberate explanation/demonstration of some aspect of the gospel of Jesus into that part of the gathering?**

A note on songs

A great many of the songs in Scripture, in particular the Psalms, speak of the mighty acts of God, self-consciously aware of the promotion of God among unbelievers. Take, for example, Psalm 96:3, "Declare his glory among the nations."

If you're the one who chooses songs or influences the choice of songs, give some thought to whether your songs are principally songs of subjective response to God, as I hear in many congregational songs these days, or songs that speak objectively of God's character and mighty acts in the pattern of the songs of ancient Israel.

Here's one of Isaac Watts.

It seems to me that this song promotes the gospel of Jesus much more ably than many more modern congregational songs.

*1 Alas! and did my Savior bleed,
and did my Sovereign die!
Would he devote that sacred head
for sinners such as I?*

*2 Was it for crimes that I have done,
he groaned upon the tree?
Amazing pity! Grace unknown!
And love beyond degree!*

*3 Well might the sun in darkness hide,
and shut its glories in,
when God, the mighty maker, died
for his own creature's sin.*

*4 Thus might I hide my blushing face
while his dear cross appears;
dissolve my heart in thankfulness,
and melt mine eyes to tears.*

*5 But drops of tears can ne'er repay
the debt of love I owe.
Here, Lord, I give myself away;*

'tis all that I can do.

3) How do we grow and develop a culture of promoting the gospel in church gatherings?

So thinking in terms of both of our two categories, making church gatherings “seeker comprehensible,” and creating deliberate opportunities to explain aspects of the gospel of Jesus in the gathering, how do we go about grounding this in our church culture?

Firstly, let's realise this kind of cultural development is not instant. It takes a long time. And it takes a lot of people; service leaders, Bible readers, prayer leaders, preachers, Kids' talkers, communion presiders, singers, etc.

But when all these people are aware of the kinds of questions we've been asking, “Where are the points where we can promote the gospel?” “How might we do this for the different elements in the service?” “Are there high context aspects to our culture?” we'll begin to shape the culture and enable the gospel to be better communicated and heard in our gatherings.

A great way to start developing a culture where any Sunday is a good Sunday to invite a friend, is to acknowledge non-Christians in the gathering every Sunday - in the sermon, in the liturgy, when people are welcomed from the front, and any other time!

Explain what's about to happen so that people unfamiliar with Christian things can make some sense of and understand each item, ie:

Teach why we say these words of a declaration of faith.

Let people know that we read the Bible because we believe that it's God's Word and how he speaks to us today.

Be clear that we confess our sins because we have all fallen short of God's standard of perfection.

Take the opportunity to teach that in the Lord's supper we look back to the cross where Jesus died so we could be forgiven, we look up, to Jesus, risen and ruling, we look forward to the great feast we will share in heaven, and we look around; knowing that all of us depend on Jesus to bring us into right relationship with God. None of us can make it to God on our own.

And let me point out this isn't just something for churches with very low or informal liturgy. The Sunday Services prayer book that's come out of the Anglican Diocese of Sydney includes a corporate confession written specifically to acknowledge the presence of people in the gathering who aren't “convinced Christians”

*O Lord our God,
you know us better than we know ourselves.
As we come before you now,
believers and doubters alike,
we all share a deep need,
for we are all lost without your grace...*

Developing a culture of acknowledging and addressing non-Christians in the gathering helps to promote the gospel in a number of different ways:

1) It allows you (preacher, service leader, etc) to address specific questions or objections that may be barriers to non-Christians accepting Christ. These are sometimes referred to as “defeater beliefs.” Somebody thinks, “because I believe X to be true, I can’t believe Y.”

The great evangelist Billy Graham would often do this throughout his teaching, quoting a hypothetical person struggling to believe his message, “‘But Billy’ you may say, ‘don’t all religions lead to the same place,’” or whatever the issue was. And he would then proceed to tackle that defeater belief, and show that it’s not true, and so not an obstacle to people believing in Jesus.

You can address people’s misunderstandings about baptism, about the Lord’s supper, about prayer, about the Scriptures, and lots more!

But of course, unless you’re deliberately trying to engage with non-Christians in how you lead and speak from the front, this kind of communication won’t be part of your culture. And let’s not forget that it’s good for our regular church attenders to hear this kind of teaching, for their own instruction, and to equip them to answer their friends’ questions also!

2) It gives regulars confidence that if they invite their friends, they will be welcomed, included, and acknowledged.

Lot of us have had that experience of inviting a friend to church, only for everything to go badly! The sermon is 45 long and mostly incomprehensible, the service leader uses language that your friend doesn’t understand (I heard about a church that referred to their ministry notices as “the intimations”), and everybody else clearly knows what to do – sit, stand, respond, and when.

But when non-Christian visitors and regulars are clearly welcomed, and elements of the service explained, it gives members confidence that if they invite a friend, they won’t feel excluded, that they’ll be able to understand, and to participate. Of course, they still need the Spirit of God to be at work in them so they understand the gospel! But we won’t have placed additional obstacles in their way.

3) It reminds regulars, including those who lead (read, sing, pray, etc) that people who don't know Jesus are a valued part of our gathering, and we want them to hear the gospel.

In some churches, there may be some Sundays when you could look out at your congregation and recognise every face. it's still important to maintain this aspect in your culture. Your careful explanation and newcomer-welcoming approach reminds the church that people who don't know Jesus are valued in the gathering, and that as a church, you value them having opportunities to hear and respond to the gospel of Jesus. It may be through being reminded on this on a Sunday when you don't notice any visitors, that one of the church members is convinced to invite a friend on another occasions.

4) Even if there are no newcomers present, there will almost certainly be regulars who aren't believers or who are not clear on the basics of the gospel.

There will almost certainly be regular members of your church who think they're a Christian, but in fact still need to have the gospel explained to them and to respond to it. Others may be unclear on key elements of the gospel.

On one occasion I visited a church and in the question time after I preached, one man said to me, "I've been in this church for 84 years, and I've never understood why Jesus had to come. Martha was a good person, why wasn't she enough?"

As I inquired of him and other members of the church, it seems that in 84 years, there had been very little attempt to explain the gospel during the church services, at least not in a way this man could understand. It always seemed to have been assumed that if you turned up on Sunday, you already knew the gospel and were in a right relationship with God.

Activities:

Complete the Secular Churches worksheet.

Choose a recent (or even better, upcoming!) order of service from your church.

What are the strange or foreign elements of the service that can be removed without effecting the purpose of function of the gathering?

How can you explain the purpose of the remaining elements of the service to promote the gospel to non-Christian newcomers?

Where are the opportunities to explain an aspect of the gospel of Jesus? How could you go about it?