Is Our Gospel Too Small?

Click on a study title you’d like to see

2
Study 1: DO YOU HAVE A STINGY GOSPEL?

12
Study 2: MISSIONAL COMMUTING

25
Study 3: THE GOSPEL OF LOVE

36
Study 4: LIVING A VIBRANT GOSPEL LIFESTYLE

48
Study 5: A WHOLE-BIBLE GOSPEL

59
Study 6: THE GOSPEL, A NAPKIN, AND FOUR CIRCLES
Is Our Gospel Too Small?

Do You Have a Stingy Gospel?

An open-handed God empowers us to speak the gospel message in both truth and love.

“I heard your gospel, it moved me to tears, but I couldn’t find the hate and I couldn’t find the fear …,” sings the Brooklyn band The Hold Steady. By the end of the song the narrator walks away from the possibility of a real Savior due to his interactions with the very people who communicated the gospel. How did the characteristics of hatred and fear come to be associated with evangelical believers? Perhaps it can be traced back to our theology, Richard J. Mouw, President of Fuller Theological Seminary, suggests in a Christianity Today article. He writes, “We all have to decide … whether we have a generous God or a stingy God. … We evangelicals often give the impression that we have decided to be a spiritually stingy people.” This study explores what it means to hold on to both truth and love in our interactions with the world.


Part 1 Identify the Current Issue

Note to leader: Provide each person with “An Open-Handed Gospel” from Christianity Today, included at the end of this study.

“Many young people in the larger society think of evangelicals as primarily ‘judgmental’ types, hostile towards folks in other religions and mean-spirited in our attitudes … . Even many young evangelicals share some of these assessments of the older generation … ‘If we don’t do something about this negative image soon, we could easily lose them for the evangelical cause,’” writes Richard J. Mouw in his Christianity Today article “An Open-Handed Gospel.”

As evangelical Christians, we can come off as contentious towards unbelievers as we “share” the gospel. On the other hand, by way of misguided compassion, we can be timid in “calling sinners to bring the burden of their sin and guilt to Calvary.” We’ve all struggled between these two extremes. But Mouw says that neither approach is biblical. Instead, he calls for a “convicted civility” or a “theological humility” as we strive to communicate the gospel to people of different faiths and lifestyles. We must “convey our Christian convictions while displaying a spirit of generosity in our relationships,” Mouw writes.

Why does this seem to be an issue for evangelicals? Mouw suggests that perhaps we have not pondered the mystery of God’s patient, gracious, salvific work in our own lives. If we are honest, our own salvation stories did not follow a formulaic straight line. So, “How can we treat other people as if they were empty or superficial beings, without the same kind of mystery?” We can be confident that God is dealing generously with those we come in contact with, thus we can be generous towards them, and clearly point them towards the “divine generosity” of the Cross.

Discussion Starters:

[Q] Why do you think evangelicals have been pegged as judgmental? Is it deserved? Why or why not?

[Q] Is God “generous” or “stingy”? Explain.

[Q] What do you think Mouw means when he writes about Martin Marty’s idea of “convicted civility”? What would that look like?

[Q] How have you seen the truth of the gospel communicated lovingly and without compromise?

[Q] “To whomever Christ is God … Christ is Savior,” Mouw states. “Do I believe that a person can be confused about this doctrine [of justification] and still be saved? Absolutely.” Do you agree or disagree? Discuss.
Part 2 Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching Point One: God gives the gospel as an announcement, not an argument.

Christian bookstores in the ’70s and ’80s stocked plenty of apologetics books—historical and archaeological proofs for the claims of Scripture. These were helpful in discussing Christ with skeptics, and they were encouraging to believers. But they also contributed to the idea in the church that the gospel was an argument to be won. If we developed an iron-clad defense, no human could withstand our logic and reason; they would have to come to Christ. We found this was not usually the case. And besides, Jesus seemed to treat the gospel as the announcement of a new reality, a new kingdom. Our tendency to argue or quarrel is quenched when we understand we are making a kingdom invitation rather than presenting a scientific proof.

[Q] What convinced you of the good news of Christ?

Read Matthew 12:18–21.

[Q] What does this prophetic passage tell you about Jesus? About God's disposition towards him? What were Jesus' mission and methods in an environment that was hostile to his good news?

[Q] Why do you think he does not see fit to quarrel, cry out, or raise his voice in the streets (v. 19)? What would cause a revolutionary or protester to act in these ways? Why does Jesus not have to “shout it out”?

[Q] What is Jesus’ approach to “reeds and wicks” here (v. 20)?

[Q] What hope does it give you that Christ’s justice will be lead to victory (v. 20)? If we can be confident of Christ's ultimate victory, how does that affect the way we treat others as we share the gospel?

Leader’s Note: In this passage it seems that gentleness can exist because of the assurance that God’s justice will be victorious. Justice will happen; thus in confidence I can reach out to people with the good news of Jesus in a loving way. Do contentiousness, judgment, and quarreling exist because we’re not so sure Christ will judge rightly? We feel we need to take things into our own hands? If we believe that the gospel is an invitation to live under the reality of Christ’s kingdom, we can communicate the truth of the gospel with clarity, gentleness, respect, and confidence.

[Q] Why can the nations put their hope in Christ (v. 21)?

[Q] Who are the bruised reeds and smoldering wicks around you? How can you approach them with the good news message and method of Jesus?
Do You Have a Stingy Gospel?

Leader’s Guide

Teaching Point Two: God gives the gospel with an open hand, not a tight fist.

“God hates fags.” We’ve all seen this placard at one time or another in news reports. And we shake our heads and wonder, “How did someone come up with this portrait of God? Is this how people view me as an evangelical?” Whether we’ve brought it on ourselves or been painted with a wide brush by the media, or both, evangelicals have been characterized by all the things we’re against. Jesus’ story of the prodigal son points to an open-handed God who desires us to be generous with those who have gone astray.

[MQ] Mouw quotes theologian Kosuke Koyama in his article: “We all have to decide … whether we have a generous God or a stingy God. And the truth is that we evangelicals often give the impression that we have decided to be a spiritually stingy people.” What do you think of that? If we are “spiritually stingy” people, how did we develop that disposition or reputation?

Read Luke 15:2, 11–32.

Leader’s Note: This is a very familiar passage of Scripture. Try reading it in another version of the Bible to get a fresh look. To check out many different versions, go to biblegateway.com.

[MQ] What does v. 2 tell you about the Pharisees’ picture of God? Where do you think they came up with this image?

[MQ] What motivated the younger son to demand his inheritance and skip town (vv. 11–13)? What jolted him back to reality (vv. 14–19)? What condition was the prodigal in at this point?

[MQ] What are the actions and attitudes of the rejected father (vv. 20–24)? How would you describe the father in this story? Is this your picture of God the Father? Why or why not?

[MQ] What enabled the father to react in this manner to his wayward son?

[MQ] The parable of the Prodigal Son could be better entitled “The Prodigal Son’s Older, Stingy Brother” (vv. 25–32). What is the attitude of the older brother? Why doesn’t he look for the prodigal? What is the message to the Pharisees described in verse 2?

[MQ] How could the older brother develop those smug, arrogant attitudes in light of his good father? How do you think Christians develop smug attitudes in light of God’s mercy and grace? Are you guilty of any self-righteousness in dealing with those who are apart from Christ?

Leader’s Note: For fun, share the lyrics of Christian artist Steve Taylor’s song “Smug”: sockheaven.net/discography/taylor/squint/03.html.
In what ways do you and your church reflect the attitude and actions of the father towards sinners? In what ways do you and your church reflect the attitude and actions of the older son?

Optional Activity:

Write an “un-testimony.” You’ve probably written or shared your testimony of how Christ entered your life and the ensuing changes he caused. Well, write a testimony as if Christ had never come into your life. Where would you be now? How would your relationships and ambitions be different? What would be your state of mind? Use your un-testimony as a personal opportunity for thanksgiving. Or, share it with the group. Sometimes we need a reminder of God’s work in our lives, and of what life is like for those who don’t know the Lord.

Teaching point three: God gave the gospel generously to me, thus I must share it generously with others.

Let’s face it: we live in a post-Christian culture. The church is no longer the center of society. There are a couple of responses that Christians and the church can have to this: 1) Get angry and rail against those who have different beliefs and lifestyles; 2) Hole up in the church out of fear of those different beliefs and lifestyles; 3) Strengthen our resolve to share the good news of Jesus with truth and compassion. We can patiently and confidently share the gospel because we can be sure of Christ’s victory.

Read 1 Peter 3:13–22.

Peter wrote this letter during a time of oppression and persecution for the church. In what ways does our culture stand against the gospel and the church? Of what are you fearful?

What does it mean to “set apart Christ as Lord” (v. 15)? What would that look like in your life? Your church? How would this action stem the tide of fear?

Optional Activity:

Take a moment to answer, in writing: “What is ’the reason for the hope that you have’ (v. 15)?” List all the reasons you have for hope from both Scripture promises and your own experience. How can you prepare yourself to give an answer about your hope to those who don’t know Christ? If you’d like, share what you wrote with the group.

If 1 Peter 3:13–22 was the only passage of Scripture you had to describe the gospel to someone, how would you do so (vv. 18–22)?
[Q] Why does Peter say we must communicate our hope in Jesus with “gentleness and respect” (v. 15)? What would that look like? What does it say about us if we don’t do it in this manner?

[Q] God relayed the good news of his victorious kingdom to us with patience (v. 20), thus we can do the same for others. Whom do you avoid or get angry with (individuals or groups) when it comes to speaking the gospel message? How could you keep God’s patience, compassion, hope, and victory in the forefront as you relate to these people?

Part 3 Apply Your Findings

Richard Mouw concludes his article by saying, “We serve a God whose generous ways with others are beyond our capacity to grasp. But that same generosity has been clearly displayed in the marvelous grace that sent our Savior to Calvary—an abundant grace that is greater than all of our sin. The proclamation of that overwhelming generosity must not be muted, even as we live in the presence of mysteries we cannot comprehend.”

So, in one sense we can be patient and generous with those who don’t know Jesus because it’s not the end of the story—God is still at work. On the other side of the coin, we can be confident and bold in telling the gospel message because we know the end of the story—Christ will be victorious.

Action Points (do one or more of the following on your own this week):

- Pray. Take time by yourself to pray through your inhibitions and/or judgmental attitudes. Take time for prayers of confession and supplication in your small group, too. And take time in your group to pray specifically for those who need to hear the gospel. Watch for what God does in your hearts and in the hearts of those for whom you are praying.

- Where do you err when it comes to communicating the gospel: On the side of holding back the truth? Or on the side of being judgmental? Depending on your answer, read one of the books below (or one recommended by a friend) on either the content of the gospel or on compassionate methods.

- Who does it right? Is there a person you know who is bold AND compassionate in sharing his or her faith? Maybe it’s time to take him or her out for coffee and talk through this idea of “convicted civility.”

— Study by Kyle White, director of Neighbors’ House, a ministry to at-risk kids in DeKalb, Illinois. He blogs at kyleLwhite.blogspot.com.
Recommended Resources

- Check out the following Bible studies at: ChristianBibleStudies.com
  - The Gospel & Social Issues
  - 1 Thessalonians: Sharing the Faith
  - Doctrine Is Not a Dirty Word
  - Fresh Ways to Connect with the Gospel
  - Missional Evangelism

- Blue Like Jazz, by Donald Miller (Thomas Nelson, 2003; ISBN 0785263705)


An Open-Handed Gospel

We have to decide whether we have a stingy or a generous God.

By Richard J. Mouw

Charles Hodge was a severe critic of the theology of Friedrich Schleiermacher. A champion of Calvinist orthodoxy at Princeton Seminary in the 19th century, Hodge had witnessed the influence of the German theologian during his own graduate studies in Germany, and was deeply disturbed by what he saw as Schleiermacher’s rejection of the Bible as an infallible divine revelation. Schleiermacher’s embrace of the rationalist critique of biblical authority, Hodge insisted, undermined the most fundamental tenets of the historic Christian faith.

But on the same pages of Systematic Theology where Hodge set forth his critique of Schleiermacher—who had by this time been dead for several decades—he included a brief personal footnote about Schleiermacher. During his studies in Germany, Hodge reported, he had frequently attended services at Schleiermacher’s church and had been impressed that the hymns sung there “were always evangelical and spiritual in an eminent degree, filled with praise and gratitude to our Redeemer.” He went on to note that he had been told by one of Schleiermacher’s colleagues that often, in the evenings, the theologian would call his family together, saying: “Hush, children; let us sing a hymn of praise to Christ.” And then Hodge adds this tribute to Schleiermacher: “Can we doubt that he is singing those praises now? To whomever Christ is God, St. John assures us, Christ is a Saviour.”

I read Charles Hodge often, and I do so for more than historical curiosity. My worries about theological trends in the early 21st century are not far removed from Hodge’s worries in his own day. Like him, I worry about trends that undermine biblical authority, thus encouraging the abandonment of historic doctrines. I even share Hodge’s particular love of Calvinist orthodoxy.

Indeed, it is precisely because I find so much to agree with in Hodge’s critique of liberal theology that I am also pleased that he added the personal footnote about Schleiermacher. I believe he was sending us a signal—one that we very much need to hear today as evangelicals.

Many evangelical commentators these days insist that salvation is closely tied to doctrinal clarity. Here, for example, is how one prominent evangelical leader criticized those of us who have endorsed the various “Evangelicals and Catholics Together” documents: “What those signers … are saying is that while they believe the doctrine of justification as articulated by the Reformers is true, they are not willing to say people must believe it to be saved. In other words, they believe people are saved who do not believe the biblical doctrine of justification.”

I can’t speak for others who look for common ground with Roman Catholics, but he certainly has me right: I am passionate in my agreement with Martin Luther on justification by faith alone. But do I believe that a person can be confused about this doctrine and still be saved? Absolutely. I wish that many of my Catholic friends would subscribe unambiguously to the views about salvation by grace alone that I hold precisely. But is their failure to do so a reason for me to doubt their salvation? Here I side clearly with Charles Hodge: “To whomever Christ is God … Christ is a Saviour.”

Convicted Civility

In a speech I heard several years ago, the Japanese-American theologian Kosuke Koyama put it nicely: We all have to decide, he said, whether we have a generous God or a stingy God. And the truth is that we evangelicals often give the impression that we have decided to be a spiritually stingy people. A recent Barna Group survey, for example, offers evidence that many young people in the larger society think of evangelicals primarily as “judgmental” types, hostile toward folks in other
religions and mean-spirited in our attitudes about homosexuality. Even many young evangelicals share some of these assessments of the older generation. A leader at an evangelical college said it this way: “A lot of our students worry about typical evangelical attitudes toward people who have different belief systems and lifestyles. It’s not that they don’t take the Bible’s teachings seriously. It’s just that they have gotten to know Muslims and gays, and they are embarrassed by the harsh spirit toward such folks that they see in the older generation. If we don’t do something about this negative image soon, we could easily lose them for the evangelical cause.”

Nothing here justifies our capitulating to moral relativism or retreating from the insistence that salvation is found in Jesus Christ alone. We must resist those errors with all of our being. An understanding of divine generosity that inhibits us from calling sinners to bring the burden of their sin and guilt to Calvary is a denial of the gospel.

A number of years ago, I wrote a book on the subject of Christian civility. I was inspired to do so by a delightful line in one of Martin Marty’s books. People today who are civil, Marty observed, often don’t have very strong convictions. And people who have strong convictions often are not very civil. What we need, he said, is convicted civility.

I have spent a lot of time trying to promote convicted civility. I have to confess, however, that I sometimes get a little nervous about that project. It is so easy—as Marty made clear—to err on one side or the other; holding both up simultaneously takes constant effort. And I would hate to have assisted the cause of a freewheeling sense of divine generosity that does not maintain vigilance in protecting and defending the truth of the gospel.

But the effort to keep this marriage together needs to be made. The proper antidote to relativism and universalism is not a retreat into a stingy spirit. We must be clear in telling others about the hope that lies within us, the apostle Peter teaches; but he quickly adds that we must always do so “with gentleness and respect” (1 Pet. 3:15–16).

Humility and Our Own Mystery
The obligation of nurturing a gentle and reverent spirit toward those with whom we disagree takes on a new urgency for us today in engaging those who represent non-Christian religions and lifestyles. How do we convey our Christian convictions while displaying a spirit of generosity in our relationships with others?

The challenge here is profoundly spiritual in nature. We evangelicals have often failed to show a proper spirit in our public relations because we have not displayed a proper spirit toward our private selves.

One of my predecessors in presidency at Fuller Seminary, Edward John Carnell, got in serious trouble for some things he said on this subject. In his inaugural address in May 1955, he talked about the need for theological humility, an emphasis that so disturbed many of his colleagues that Carnell never quite recovered from the gloom that descended on the beginning of his presidential career. I would like to think that evangelicals are now ready to affirm the wisdom of what he said in that address.

Carnell’s main theme was the need to approach those with whom we disagree with a sense of mystery grounded in an acknowledgement of the mystery of our own inner lives. Quoting the oft-sung “invitation” hymn—“Just as I am, though tossed about, with many a conflict, many a doubt, fightings and fears within, without, O Lamb of God, I come”—he reflected on the mystery of those inner conflicts that take place in “the depths of our own selfhood.” “How can we treat other people as if they were empty or superficial beings, without the same kind of mystery?” he asked.
In the opening sections of his *Institutes*, John Calvin argues that the knowledge of God and the knowledge of self are intimately intertwined. Carnell was extending this important insight: A failure to acknowledge the complexity of our own inner workings inevitably leads to a failure to acknowledge the mystery of God’s dealings with others.

**Isaac and Ishmael**

Two summers ago I was asked to give the final lecture at a Chautauqua-sponsored weeklong series focusing on “the Abrahamic religions.” The audience, made up primarily of mainline Protestants, some Roman Catholics, many Jews, a few Muslims—and almost no evangelicals—had already heard from some excellent speakers representing Judaism and Islam, as well as from a Roman Catholic scholar. My assignment was to conclude the series with a presentation about the role of evangelicals in public life, focusing on our relationships with Jews and Muslims.

My speech was mainly devoted to what I see as some of the key weaknesses and strengths of evangelicalism as a public presence in American culture. But I concluded by informing my audience about two personal aspects of my own faith perspective. The first involved an encounter I had recently witnessed between a Jew and a Muslim. About 30 or so American religious leaders representing Christianity, Judaism, and Islam had the privilege of a closed-door session with King Abdullah of Jordan on one of his visits to the United States. We were impressed by the Arab leader’s professed commitment to encouraging fellow Muslims to cooperate with Jews and Christians in countering the toxic influence of extremists in each of our communities. His responses to probing questions were equally impressive—indeed, they were often quite inspiring.

As our session neared its conclusion, an elderly rabbi asked for a final word. He told the king that he was deeply moved by what he had shared. “We need you in our world of turmoil today,” he said, “but I worry about your safety and the well being of your family.” He pledged to pray for King Abdullah and his loved ones. And then the rabbi offered, as a fellow descendent of Abraham, the well-known ancient blessing: “The LORD bless you and keep you. The LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious unto you. The LORD lift up the light of his countenance upon you, and give you peace.”

I told my Chautauqua audience how moved I was by that encounter. As an evangelical Christian, I said, I believe with all my heart that the God I worship, the God of Abraham, looked down on that scene, where a descendent of Isaac gave a blessing to a descendent of Ishmael, and smiled and said, “That’s good! That’s the way I want things to be!” I’m not entirely clear about how to work this into my theology, I confessed, but I’m willing to live with some mystery in thinking about that encounter.

But then I quickly moved to the second aspect that I needed to share. “Those of you who watch professional football games know that there is often somebody in the crowd right behind the goalposts who holds up a ‘John 3:16’ sign. I need to tell you this: That’s me!” I find I need to live with some mystery about what God is doing in the Abrahamic religions. At the same time, I cannot fail to proclaim the John 3:16 message that God has sent a Savior, and that those who believe on him will not perish but have everlasting life.

Both of the points I made to the Chautauqua audience were about divine generosity. We serve a God whose generous ways with others are beyond our capacity to grasp. But that same generosity has been clearly displayed in the marvelous grace that sent our Savior to Calvary—an abundant grace that is greater than all of our sin. The proclamation of that overwhelming generosity must not be muted, even as we live in the presence of mysteries we cannot comprehend.

—Richard J. Mouw is president and professor of Christian philosophy at Fuller Theological Seminary.
Missional Commuting

Forging the way between accommodation and irrelevance in communicating the gospel message.

Missional evangelist and theologian David Fitch has spent many of his years in ministry resisting the temptation to “accommodate” the gospel message to a culture bent with tendencies towards individualism, consumerism, materialism, and busyness. But now as he contemplates his experience in ministry, he wonders, “Can the gospel be too big?” In other words, when communicating the gospel message, have we sacrificed relevance in our attempt to avoid accommodation?

One of our primary callings as Christians is to communicate the gospel in ways that are effective for our given context, but also faithful to the biblical message. Such a task requires us to avoid the extremes of both accommodation and irrelevance in our gospel message. But how are we to achieve such a tenuous balance in the actual practice of ministry?

Scripture: John 3:16–21; Acts 17:16–34; 1 Corinthians 15:1–7; Romans 12:1–3; Galatians 1:6–12; 5:13–26

Based on: “Missional Misstep,” by David Fitch, Christianity Today (September 2008)
Part 1 Identify the Current Issue

Note to leader: Provide each person with the article “Missional Misstep” from Christianity Today, included at the end of this study.

The evangelistic efforts of the contemporary Western church have usually been criticized on one of two fronts. Some critics claim that the church has failed to conform in a changing world and therefore is irrelevant in a postmodern, post-Christian culture; others maintain that the church has reduced the gospel message or wrongfully accommodated to a sinful culture that is hostile to Christ.

Theologian Darrell Gruder, in his book The Continuing Conversion of the Church, suggests that throughout history the church has been involved in the complex process of reducing the gospel in order to translate it for a specific culture. This becomes a problem when we overemphasize “the small gospel” and subsequently fail to lead people back to “the big gospel”—that is, back to the complete fullness of the gospel message.

David Fitch argues that there is an equal and opposite danger in “refusing to reduce the gospel out of a disdain for a particular culture’s sins.” From the very inception of his ministry at Life on the Vine Christian Community Church in the suburbs of Chicago, Fitch struggled to avoid accommodating the gospel message to a community plagued by the “ills” of contemporary Western culture—individualism, consumerism, materialism, and busyness. Instead, Fitch focused his sermons on what he describes as “the big gospel”—the cosmic scope of the mission of God in the world. In his refusal to accommodate the gospel message to his cultural context, Fitch realized he may have been making the gospel message irrelevant to his listeners.

So how are we to avoid the “two equal and opposite errors” of accommodation and irrelevance when we communicate the gospel message? How can we communicate the gospel in ways that are effective for our given context, but also faithful to the biblical message?

Discussion Starters:

[Q] Do you agree with critics who say the evangelistic efforts of the church have been either irrelevant or overly accommodating? Why or why not?

• Can you think of other ways the evangelistic efforts of the church have been criticized?

[Q] Do you agree with the claim that irrelevance and accommodation are extremes that should be avoided when communicating the gospel message? Why or why not?

• If you agree, what changes do you think need be made so that these extremes can be avoided in the future?
[Q] Describe your church’s evangelistic efforts. Have they been successful in avoiding the pitfalls of accommodation and irrelevance? Why or why not?

[Fitch suggests that the solution for both irrelevance and accommodation is missional commuting: “a constant journey back and forth between big and small: from the bigness of God’s work to translating it for our neighbors to bringing them back into this grand mission all over again.” Do you think this is an effective approach? Why or why not?}

Part 2 Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching Point One: In order to avoid the pitfalls of both irrelevance and accommodation in communicating the gospel message, we must first understand what the gospel is.

In 1963, pastor and Bible translator J. B. Phillips wrote that it was “high time for the word ‘Gospel’ to be rehabilitated.” He lamented the fact that the word had become watered down and blurred with overuse. The word gospel was employed to refer to any kind of teaching, ideal, or remedy. People would swear by the “gospel” of hard work or the “gospel” of success. For Phillips, it was critical for Christians to remember that the gospel was the good news of God for humankind—that humans no longer need to feel guilty or ashamed towards God, and can begin here and now to live as the children of God.

In the ensuing years, little progress had been made to redeem the word gospel from overuse and misuse. Commercials boast of the “gospel” of this product or that service. Dieticians proclaim the “gospel” of the Adkins, vegetarian, or low-sodium diets. Television pastors preach the “gospel” of health, wealth, and well-being. Social activists teach the “gospel” of social justice and political activism. But none of these are consistent with how the Bible describes and defines the gospel message.

What are the four key elements of the gospel message that the apostle Paul preached to the Corinthians?

[Q] What evidence does Paul give for the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ?

Leader’s Note: Two lines of evidence are given here for the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ: the testimony of the Old Testament Scriptures (Ps. 16:8–11; Isa. 53:5–6, 11) and the testimony of eyewitnesses (Acts 1:21–22).

[Q] According to verse 2, what is the significance of perseverance in the gospel message?
Leader’s Note: Perseverance in the faith is an important part of the gospel message because it alludes to the fact that true belief in the gospel results in faithful obedience to the core message. See also Hebrews 3:14.

Read Galatians 1:6–12.

[Q] What is the apostle Paul cautioning believers about in this passage?

[Q] Why do you think it was so important to the apostle Paul that believers appropriately distinguish between the real gospel and the “different gospel”?

[Q] According to Paul, where did he receive knowledge about the good news he proclaimed?

- What is the source of the “different gospels” that were being proclaimed to the Galatians (v. 11)?

In Elwell’s *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, R. H. Mounce defines the gospel as “the joyous proclamation of God’s redemptive activity in the world.” The heart of the gospel message is that humankind, through sinful disobedience, was desperately lost and without hope, but that God, out of love for humankind, sent his only Son to atone for our sins and set us in right relationship with him.

[Q] Describe how the gospel is preached in your ministry or local church. Is it consistent with the biblical definition of gospel? Why or why not?

Teaching Point Two: To minimize the risk of making the gospel “too small” (overly accommodating it to the surrounding culture), we must not confuse the simplicity of the gospel with the ease of the gospel.

Many times, when sharing the gospel message, we strive to not make the gospel seem complicated to our listeners. After all, the gospel message is, and always has been, simple enough for even a small child to understand. And yet, because of this we sometimes risk making the gospel too small by failing to share the fullness of the gospel message. The good news of the gospel is not only that God has accepted us just as we are; it is also that God is not content to let us remain as we are. True acceptance of the gospel message requires transformation. Simple, but not easy.

In *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis comments, “Now the whole offer which Christianity makes is this: that we can, if we let God have His way, come to share in the life of Christ ... Christ is the Son of God. If we share in this kind of life we also shall be sons of God. We shall love the Father as He does and the Holy Ghost will arise in us …. Every Christian is to become a little Christ. The whole purpose of becoming a Christian is simply nothing else.”
The aim of the gospel message, in whatever context it is communicated, should be the transformation of whole persons into the likeness of Christ. Transformation into Christlikeness is a high and holy goal, and all too often in our ministries—and even in our own personal lives—we settle for so much less than this. We settle for more people rather than deeper people. We settle for increased Bible knowledge and rote memorization of Scripture rather than thoughts that are anchored and focused on God. We settle for service that arises out of a sense of legalistic obligation rather than a heart overflowing with love.

Yes, we settle for a great deal less than that to which we are called. To reclaim our true aim, we need to reexamine the concept of Christlikeness and consider what it might look like when played out in the lives of individual believers. We need to ask ourselves, “What does a person who has been transformed into the image of Christ look like? What do they think about? What do they do?”

Read Romans 12:1–3.

[Q] What does Paul urge believers to do “in view of God’s mercy”?

[Q] Why does Paul emphasize that it is important for us to remember that we do this “in view of God’s mercy”?

Leader’s Note: This is important because our laying aside of old habits is done out of gratitude—not out of a legalistic obligation.

[Q] David Kinnaman, in his book unChristian, suggests that one of the reasons outsiders are so resistant to the gospel is because Christians seem hypocritical—that is, they are mostly concerned about conforming to strict moral behaviors that they never seem to be able to live up to. How do you think the “renewing of our minds” goes beyond simple adherence to certain behaviors?


On the one hand, the good news of the gospel is that we no longer live under the yoke of slavery to the law. We are free from the burden of the law. On the other hand, Paul warns us not to misuse this freedom by indulging our sinful nature.

[Q] According to verse 13, how are we to use our freedom?

[Q] List the “vices” Paul instructs us to avoid in verses 19–21.

• Which of these vices do you tend to struggle most with in your life?

• How might these vices affect your witness or sharing of the gospel?
List the virtues that Paul describes in verses 22–23.

- Which of these qualities do you want to grow in?
- How do you think demonstrating these character qualities would help you to communicate the gospel in your community?
- How is demonstrating these qualities different from trying to adhere to a certain moral standard?

Based on your reading of these passages, would you describe the gospel as easy? Why or why not?

Optional Activity:

In Mere Christianity, C. S. Lewis writes, “He [Jesus] never talked vague, idealistic gas. When He said, ‘Be perfect,’ He meant it. He meant that we must go in for the full treatment. It is hard; but the sort of compromise we are all hankering after is harder—in fact, it is impossible. It may be hard for an egg to turn into a bird: it would be a jolly sight harder for it to fly while remaining an egg. We are like eggs at present. And you cannot go on indefinitely being just an ordinary, decent egg. We must be hatched or go bad.”

With a partner or in a small group, discuss this quote and address the following questions:

In the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:48), Jesus instructs his listeners to “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” What does he mean by “perfect” in this passage? What standard has he called us to?

Leader’s Note: Although we cannot attain perfection in this life, we can aspire to be as much like Christ as possible in the following areas: character (Christlikeness), holiness, maturity, and love. This passage does not mean that total perfection is possible; it means that this is the standard we are to continually strive toward.

How is “going in for the full treatment” (i.e. becoming more like Christ, laying down our old habits, sins, etc.) difficult?

In what way might it be harder to compromise on this point—to accept the forgiveness of Christ yet remain unchanged in our character?

Do you agree with Lewis that this sort of compromise is impossible in the Christian life, that it is impossible to accept the forgiveness of Christ without changing as a person to be more like Christ?
Teaching point three: To minimize the risk of making the gospel “too big” (making the gospel seem irrelevant to the surrounding culture), we must continually assess our motives and ensure that our hearts are motivated by love and compassion for a lost, broken, and hurting world.

David Fitch had always resisted the idea of making the gospel fit the suburban culture he lived in. He was “repulsed by the expectation to turn the gospel into something that could fit people’s schedules or provide immediate, quick-fix spiritual benefits.” Instead, he went to the other extreme and preached sermons that were so focused on the “bigness” of the gospel message that it made the gospel seem inaccessible to his audience.

Although, as we saw before, we should not reduce the gospel so that we compromise its message and meaning, we should be cautious of going to the opposite extreme of making the gospel message so esoteric that it remains inaccessible to the very people we hope to reach. To guard against this extreme, we should prayerfully consider our own motivations for sharing the gospel and how our strategies in sharing the gospel reflect these motivations.

Read John 3:16–21.

[Q] What was God’s motivation for sending his Son, Jesus, to die on the Cross?

[Q] Do you think that we have the same motivation when communicating the gospel message to others?

[Q] Why do you think our motivations are important when sharing the gospel with unbelievers?

[Q] Can you think of times when you have seen other Christians sharing the gospel because of other motivations?

• What do you think their motivations were?

• Do you think they were effective? Why or why not?

Read Acts 17:16–34.

[Q] How did Paul feel when he saw the city of Athens full of idols (v. 16)?

[Q] How did he respond (vv. 17–18)?

Leader’s Note: Paul started teaching and preaching in the synagogue and the marketplace, and was soon taken to the Areopagus (a place where philosophers and laymen gathered to discuss new ideas and philosophies from the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers) so that he could share more about his “new teaching.”
[Q] How did Paul open his speech to the Greeks at the Areopagus (v. 22)? Why is this an important element in sharing the gospel?

[Q] How did he build rapport with his audience and find a point of connection (v. 23)?

[Q] How did people respond to his message (vv. 32–34)?

Part 3 Apply Your Findings

Andrew Walls, in the book *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith*, suggests the missional Christian struggles between two principles: the indigenous principle and the pilgrim principle. The gospel is indigenous in any culture. Just as Gentiles were not required to become Jews in order to become Christians, people in today’s world are not required to join another culture in order to become Christians. The gospel is at home in every culture.

But though the gospel is at home in every culture, the pilgrim principle holds that the gospel challenges core components of every culture. Walls comments, “Along with the indigenizing principle which makes his faith a place to feel at home, the Christian inherits the pilgrim principle, which whispers to him that he has no abiding city and warns him that to be faithful to Christ will put him out of step with his society; for that society never existed, in East or West, ancient time or modern, which could absorb the word of Christ painlessly into its system.”

So how should Christians deal with the tension between the “small gospel” and the “big gospel,” between the indigenous principle and the pilgrim principle? How can we avoid both accommodation and irrelevance when communicating the gospel? Fitch suggests a form of “missional commuting: a daily journey between two worlds.” The tension between these two principles has been at work from very early on in the history of Christianity, but we can successfully deal with this tension by remembering the heart of the gospel message, by distinguishing the simplicity of the gospel from the ease of the gospel, and finally, by examining our own motivations and strategies for communicating the gospel message to unbelievers.

**Action Point:**

- **What steps could you take to safeguard the gospel message in your ministry or local church?**
- **Describe how well your church or ministry has emphasized the importance of growth in Christlikeness when sharing the gospel. In what ways could your church or ministry improve in this area?**
• Describe a few ways you could use Paul’s strategy in Acts 17:16–34 in your current context.

• Based on what you’ve learned in this study, describe a few ways you think the gospel could be effectively communicated in your given context while remaining faithful to the biblical message.

— Halee Gray Scott is a writer and a professor at Azusa Pacific University. She lives in Los Angeles, California, where she is currently completing a Ph.D. in Educational Studies.

Recommended Resources

ecz Check out the following Bible studies at: ChristianBibleStudies.com

ecz The Gospel & Social Issues
ecz 1 Thessalonians: Sharing the Faith
ecz Doctrine Is Not a Dirty Word
ecz Fresh Ways to Connect with the Gospel
ecz Missional Evangelism


ecz Good News: Thoughts on God and Man, by J. B. Phillips (MacMillan Company, 1963; ASIN B0007DN9SA)


Mere Christianity, by C. S. Lewis (HarperOne, 2001; ISBN 0060652926)

Missional Misstep

Emphasizing the big gospel can make it hard to communicate any gospel.
By David Fitch

Can the gospel be too big? For some of us in the missional church movement, this question borders on heresy. We regularly caution that the gospel is not only about what Jesus can do for me. It is primarily about the transformation of our very way of life into God’s mission for the world. We resist any temptation to turn the gospel into anything that might be too “user friendly.” The mission of God (missio Dei), so we proclaim, must be all-encompassing, and we must become participants in it.

Yet for all the good in this approach, there may be another heresy beneath the surface. For in protecting the bigness of the gospel, we risk making the Christian life inaccessible to those outside of it. As a result, amid the current swell of appreciation for missio Dei theology in American churches, and the outcries against a gospel that has become too small, I find myself concerned about the ways we may unintentionally be making the gospel too big.

Theologian Darrell Guder has observed that the church is always in the process of reducing the gospel in order to translate it for a given culture. In translating the gospel, we inevitably emphasize certain aspects of it over others. This unavoidable process only becomes a problem when we become fixated on a particular translation, permanently shrinking the gospel instead of leading people into its fullness. Guder calls this process the “challenge of reductionism,” and calls for the “continual conversion” of the church, in which the church must always re-inhabit each new context with the gospel in a way that is suitable for its particular time and place. Being the gospel in the world, therefore, demands a continual traveling back and forth from the grand scope of all that God is doing in Christ to the simple offer of salvation to the stranger and back again.

Guder is proposing that the church must follow this process to be faithful missionaries of the gospel. But there is a complementary danger of refusing to reduce the gospel out of disdain for a particular culture’s sin. We resist the accommodation of the gospel to a culture that seems to have such evident deficiencies. But in so doing, we refuse to speak a gospel that can be heard by those afflicted by these very cultural ills. We insist, maybe sinfully, on keeping the gospel out of reach.

My wife and I learned this when we moved to the northwest suburbs of Chicago to plant a church. Chicago’s suburbs stretch across hundreds of square miles of highways, tollways, subdivisions, monster malls, gated communities, and corporate offices. Thousands of cars speed along the expressways carrying people to their homes, jobs, and children’s sport programs. The breakneck pace pulsates so heavily that it is difficult for any individual not to be swallowed up. The same forces press upon churches as well, urging them to make the gospel as convenient as possible for people on the move.

As we planted the first seeds of our church in this place, I was repulsed by the expectation to turn the gospel into something that could fit people’s schedules or provide immediate, quick-fix spiritual benefits. But in response to the sins of suburbia, I went to the other extreme. I became phobic about our church becoming a supermarket-like pseudo-community providing spiritual goods and services to all comers. With too much self-assurance, I preached sermons on how the church must define its very existence as the extension of God’s mission in the world. Drawing on the great formulations of missional thinkers Lesslie Newbigin and David Bosch, I proudly taught that the church was an extension of the Trinity, gathering the world unto himself. The mission of God would be our very identity, and its cosmic scope would dwarf the forces that seek to shrink our vital gospel into some banal conformity.

My intentions were good, and Bosch and Newbigin still sound as good as ever. But how does this gospel become comprehensible for those lost in the suburbs? Can this incredible vision of God’s work meet those of
Missional Misstep

Making Converts in Post-Christendom

In those first few years of ministry at Life on the Vine Christian Community, Jack and Suzanne (not their real names) came to us with divorce papers in hand, asking for help. They knew little of the gospel. They had no time for church. Their art careers were the center of their lives, and they couldn’t imagine it any other way. Nonetheless, Jack managed to hang out with a group of us meeting for confession and prayer every Monday night. One ugly sin after another would come up in Jack’s life (as for us all). Together, we would deal with each sin, working out repentance and the forgiveness of Christ in this man’s life. There were some holy moments. Nonetheless, the sins would persist.

One night, as Jack’s marijuana addiction was being dealt with for what seemed the hundredth time, two men in the group lashed out. They asked Jack if he was serious about Christ. If not, they said, he should excuse himself from the group. Jack soon wandered away.

Some might be quick to say that Jack had flat-out rejected the gospel. I hesitate to make that judgment. From my vantage point, Jack just couldn’t get it. He thought he was doing what he was supposed to do: confess sin, repent, receive forgiveness, and go home and try harder. Yet each time, forgiveness and repentance would become the means to the same old ends. He could not grasp the full implications of how God’s forgiveness through Christ might actually change his living. For all our attempts to paint a big picture of God’s mission for Jack, he could not understand what it meant to reorient his entire life toward God in this way. He could not envision the grander life he had been called into.

For me, Jack illustrated the central problem: The wide-reaching implications of the gospel were inaccessible to someone thoroughly shaped by the structures of contemporary society. Surely we know that only the Holy Spirit could ultimately illumine Jack’s heart. Nonetheless, I questioned whether our community’s life and deep sense of God’s mission had been accessible to Jack. He did not have time to make it to every Sunday gathering. Our initiation process into baptism took six months. This was daunting to even the most committed.

Jack illustrated the potential hole in missional churches like ours. We define the church and its life as God’s mission as we incarnate his purposes for the world. Yet we lack the wherewithal to “bridge” those in need from where they are to the mission of God.

I have often been asked about the number of conversions in missional churches. I hesitate to even answer this question. Part of this is because I believe conversion in missional settings takes longer and is often messier. Most missional churches are aimed at so-called “post-Christendom” settings, in which people have no initiation into the Christian faith. Any new convert therefore must first understand the biblical story of God’s mission in and for the world, from Israel all the way to the Second Coming, in order to even know what it might mean to confess that “Jesus is Lord” over his or her life.

This kind of conversion happens over time. It often happens as strangers experience daily life with Christians, learning the story of our lives in Christ. This is why a “tool” for initiating such people into Christ is so important. Someone can “hang” with us for years and not sufficiently enter in unless intentionally guided through a process. For this reason I have suspected that missional churches need a different kind of evangelistic tool that maintains the hugeness of God’s mission, while still inviting people into personal conversion and participation in the work of redemption God is doing.

Becoming Part of the Bridge

This reality hit me hard one night at a pastors’ meeting. As we were discussing our church’s missional
efforts, a pastor suggested that while we had successfully preached the life of Christ and his mission, we had in the process made church members timid in the actual task of leading people to Christ. At our church, we have often panned old methods of evangelism that make salvation into a transaction. We wince at any quick prayer that would reduce repentance and faith to a ticket out of hell. We believe this approach has trained people into all the wrong ways of knowing Christ. But on this particular night, we realized our members needed a different kind of evangelistic tool to lead their friends from their former lives into the “new order” of creation.

We have not yet pinpointed what a four spiritual laws diagram or bridge illustration (in which Christ “bridges” the chasm between man and God) might look like for our missional community. Nonetheless, after many conversations, I believe any such tool must accomplish at least two things. First, such an evangelistic tool must lead the new believer in the back-and-forth motion between the bigness of God’s salvation for the world and what he wants to do “for us”: forgive our sins and shape us in the image of his Son. In other words, such a tool should begin with 2 Corinthians 5:19 (“that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men’s sins against them”), move to the personal John 3:16, and go back again. This tool must in effect allow the busy suburban family person to catch a glimpse of the world he or she is not seeing, instead of first appealing to the all-too-familiar “need.” Like a mind-bender movie that helps us see reality in a different way, such a tool would unfold the big picture of God’s “reconciling the world to himself.” This sets the stage that makes possible the words, “whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” Such a tool will prepare us to offer a glimpse of a new world order when everything else has become cloudy and dark. It will be composed of stories and pictures, both scriptural and personal.

Second, this evangelistic tool must function from within the context of the community’s life, because it is only here that the words and pictures we share take on flesh and make sense. In post-Christendom settings in which people have no language to comprehend the gospel, an evangelistic tool can make the gospel seem like another lofty idea for achieving a better life. The gospel therefore should not be separated from real lives engaged in living the mission. It is the community that translates the mission of God, through tiny acts of loving one another and the world around us. The community becomes a necessary part of “the bridge.”

At times, we at Life on the Vine have thrown up our hands and said that such community is not possible in suburban life. Yet who is not blessed by a friend who takes the time to offer “a cup of water” in the desert that suburban life can become? These relationships minister the gospel. And out of these relationships, words become explanations of a compelling way of life (1 Pet. 3:15). They make possible that communal moment when we say, “You’ve been hanging around awhile, you know what we’re about; isn’t it time to make a decision to follow Jesus as Lord?” Such a tool should provide the words to make “the invitation to turning” the natural extension of our communal hospitality.

We at Life on the Vine have yet to arrive at this elusive evangelistic tool. We continue to navigate Guder’s “challenge of reductionism” for our context. It is still as busy as ever here, and the gospel should not be minimized to fit the suburbs’ maddening pace. Yet loving our neighbors will mean a constant journey back and forth between big and small: from the bigness of God’s work to translating it for our neighbors to bringing them back into this grand mission all over again. Call it missional commuting: a daily journey between worlds. Fortunately, unlike so many single-driver car trips, it’s a journey our whole church—this unlikely family that’s being grafted into God’s mission—can take together.

—David Fitch is an unusual church planter because he is also a theologian, occupying the Lindner Chair of Evangelical Theology at Northern Seminary. And he is an unusual theologian and professor because he is a church planter, immersed in Life on the Vine, a “missional” church in the northwest suburbs of Chicago. This double life has made his writing, both online at his weblog, Reclaiming the Mission, and his provocative book, The Great Giveaway, must reading.
Is Our Gospel Too Small?

The Gospel of Love

We need to challenge the self-centered life with renewed commitment to the greatness of God’s love for humankind.

We face great challenges today, including economic woes, shaky marriages, stress, and health problems. But the fundamental issue Christians face, according to Bradley Nasif, is the poverty of love—love of God and love for one another. As a result, our gospel has become too small and self-centered. Nasif brings an Orthodox perspective to the spiritual crisis we face today.

Drawing on the teachings and reflections of desert fathers and mothers from the third and fourth centuries, Nasif calls on contemporary Christians to come to terms with the sinfulness of self-love when confronted with the gracious demands of divine, Trinitarian love.

As Nasif says, “We need to aim not at love in the abstract but at love in the practical. Each individual needs to ask herself, ‘What is it that keeps me from love?’” That question is central to the spiritual poverty of love that we face in our lives, and leads us to find biblical guidance to develop a deeper sense of love in our lives and in the life of the church.

Scripture: Isaiah 49:1–6; Ezekiel 36:26–27; Mark 12:28–31; 1 John 4:13–21

Based on: “The Poverty of Love,” by Bradley Nasif, Christianity Today

©2009 Christianity Today International

ChristianBibleStudies.com
Part 1 Identify the Current Issue

Note to leader: Provide each person with the article “The Poverty of Love” from Christianity Today, included at the end of this study.

Love is at the core of human life. To love and to be loved is the dynamic of relationships with others and with God. Most importantly, love is at the center of divine communion and communication within the Trinity. At our best, the love we have for one another and for God is a reflection of the nature and essence of the divine life. But there are two flaws regarding love in our fallen nature as human beings. First, love can be too personal, too self-centered. Sometimes this is called the “human trinity”: Me, Myself, and I. The other problem is that love is abstract. We can grasp the idea of love, but not the reality and challenge of love.

This issue has been part of human life since Adam and Eve, and in the Christian church since the time of Constantine and the legalization of Christianity in the Roman Empire. As Bradley Nasif points out, our situation in the 21st century is similar to the 4th century. He writes, “Under Emperor Constantine, large numbers joined the church for the social privileges it bestowed. Many sought status and prosperity more than the Cross.” Church history reflects a tension between wealth and power and the poverty of love. In our time, Nasif notes, much attention is given to self-commitment, self-esteem, and self-improvement—a gospel of personality that leads to a poverty of love.

In the third and fourth centuries, some responded by separating themselves from the world as they knew it, committing their entire life and well being to God’s provision. Through self-denial and the disciplines of poverty, celibacy, and fasting, these men and women engaged in spiritual warfare and utter dependence on the power and love of God—one God in the Trinity of Persons. Some of the wealthiest and most powerful people of the time sought out these spiritual warriors in the desert and the mountains of Egypt. The guidance that these saints gave to the seekers of the time laid the foundations for early Christianity. These teachings became central to the Eastern Orthodox traditions, but less influential in Western Christianity. Reflecting on their teachings may be of great help as we wrestle with the poverty of love in our time.

Discussion Starters:

[Q] To what extent do you agree that the 21st-century American church mirrors the church of the Roman Empire?

• What do you think it was like for Christianity to become “legal” under Constantine? What might have been good about it and how might it have had a negative effect on the church? How did Christianity then become cultural?

• How is it cultural now?
[Q] In what ways does our culture reflect self-love and the desire for self-esteem?

- How is that search addressed in and by the local church?

[Q] In what ways does the church today reflect a “poverty of love”?

- In what ways do we have a “love-starved” church?
- How do individual Christians today wrestle with a loveless life?

[Q] In what ways does the local church challenge the “personality” pattern of love—love of self?

- What impact, if any, does this challenge have on our sense of mission and the practice of personal and corporate discipleship?

Part 2 Discover the Eternal Principles

As followers of Jesus Christ, we must be willing to live out the love that he showed for us and for the world in giving himself up to death on a cross. That sacrificial act—the moment of greatest poverty in Jesus’ life—was the revelation of the abundant love that God has for us. Taking up our cross and following Christ may be the best way that we can remedy the poverty of love that has a hold on human life and on the church’s ministry today.

**Teaching Point One: The greatest commandment is to love God—and others.**


One of the most well-known Gospel passages is this one about the “Greatest Commandment.” A teacher of the law asks Jesus an academic question—to which Jesus gives a compelling and demanding answer. The greatest commandment that God gives in the Torah (Books of the Law) is to love God completely and continuously: with all our heart and soul and strength (Deut. 6:4–5). Loving God is not a good thought or a strong emotion. It is a total commitment. But Jesus goes beyond the teacher’s question and cites the connected commandment: to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. Note that “self” is at the end of the equation. Contemporary people might say that we need to love ourselves before we can love our neighbor—or even God himself. Jesus makes it clear that it is the other way around.

Nasif notes that the desert fathers and mothers see the nature of love in a radically different way, “one based on Trinitarian divine love and human freedom. They offer an alternative portrait of what being human really means … they call us to engage our external challenges by first conquering our own inner passions through the lordship of Christ.”
The prophet Ezekiel also echoes this Greatest Commandment by asserting that a time would come when God will bring his people back from exile, cleanse them from all passions and impurities, and put a “new heart”—one of flesh and no longer of stone—in them so that they can fully receive the love of God, perceive his glory, and follow his ways. In this renewing moment, they will be rich in faith and trust in God alone. Read Ezekiel 36:26–27.

**[Q]** What are barriers to loving God with heart, soul, mind, and strength? What are some of the major distractions or deterrents we experience in 21st-century culture?

**[Q]** In your opinion, is self-love spiritually unhealthy? If so, why?

- Are there ways we can love ourselves that are spiritually mature? Describe some of the elements of healthy self-love and how God’s nature is reflected in that dynamic.

**[Q]** What is it like when God gives us a new heart? What did Ezekiel’s prophecy mean?

**Optional Activity:**

On a chalkboard, whiteboard or flipchart, draw two hearts. In one, write the title: Heart of Stone. In the other, write the title: Heart of Flesh. Think together and list the patterns, activities, or characteristics of a “stone heart,” one that does not know God’s presence. In the Heart of Flesh, list the characteristics of a heart turned to God. Then reflect on which elements of the Heart of Stone still need to be confronted in your own life. In Nasif’s words, how do we need to declare war on the inner adversaries that hide in our hearts?

**Teaching Point Two: A sanctified human nature transparently reflects God’s love.**

The apostle Paul insists that the followers of Jesus Christ need to have the same heart and mind as was in Christ Jesus. In his letter to the Philippian church, Paul quotes from an ancient Christian hymn that celebrated the fact that Christ fully denied himself and “humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross” (Phil. 2:8). This sacrificial love hardly displayed the poverty of love, but, rather, a great opportunity to reveal the transforming power of God’s glory and exaltation. As Nasif points out, the spiritual guides of the third and fourth centuries were willing to imitate Christ in this way. As they became nothing, God became all in them. These men and women became obedient to Scripture by living it out.

Some of these spiritual disciples lived solitary lives in the desert; others formed Christian communities. They learned how to demonstrate another divine direction in living out love in human life. As John writes in his first letter to the church, we love God because he first loved us. Therefore, he says, we must love one another. Read 1 John 4:13–21.
The Gospel of Love
Leader’s Guide

[Q] What does it mean to become spiritually transparent to each other?

• If we love one another, do we reveal God’s abiding love for us? How?

[Q] What are some problems that a congregation might encounter when living out the message that John shares in his letter to his church?

• Why do members of a congregation have a hard time demonstrating love for each other?

[Q] Nasif describes how the desert fathers and mothers understood that obedience to Scripture was essential to cultivating God’s love. Why is this so? What are some challenges to obedience to Scripture?

Teaching point three: The church is to be a loving community with a global mission.

The desert mothers and fathers, Nasif says, sought to do more than reflect on Scripture. They sought to put God’s Word into practice in their lives as a way to draw nearer to God and become more intimate with him. “The monks interpreted Scriptures, not just through study, but also by putting them into practice.” He strongly urges us to do the same. “I imagine that those reading this article have more Bible knowledge than they will ever put into practice in their lifetime. Yet it’s not more knowledge we need, it’s more love and obedience.”

Jesus faced the same dilemma with his followers. One of his most memorable teachings came, not by word, but by example. Instead of expecting his disciples to wash his feet (as a servant would do for a guest), he washed his disciples’ feet first. This act was a radical demonstration of love based in humility and service. Jesus says, “You call me ‘Teacher’ and ‘Lord,’ and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet” (John 13:13–14). For Jesus, this is God’s love in action—humble service.

One primary biblical principle is that love and obedience are demonstrated by the faithful, not only in the local congregation or even in the surrounding community, but in the world at large. Isaiah issues a clarion call that remains relevant for 21st-century Christians. Through him, the LORD says, “It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth.” Read Isaiah 49:1–6.

Ultimately, a vision for global mission helps the individual Christian and the local church to grow out of a gospel that is too small, and to bring the power of God’s love to the needy, both spiritually and practically, around the world.
[Q] Describe some ways that you have sought to demonstrate the love of God in service and in global mission.

  • In what ways does your congregation have a missionary heart and a spirit of service?
  
  • In what ways can your congregation expand its commitment of love for the larger world?

[Q] What are some practical ways that you can “wash one another’s feet”?

  • How would this reveal the love of Christ to another person?
  
  • How can you do that without calling attention to yourself?

[Q] How do you need to be encouraged to share yourself in ministry to others? What hinders you from doing that? What, in your case, does it mean to demonstrate love and obedience to God in practical ways?

### Part 3 Apply Your Findings

One of the most popular hymns ever written by 18th-century composer Charles Wesley has a familiar ring:

\[
\begin{align*}
Love \text{ divine, all loves excelling,} \\
Joy \text{ of heaven to earth come down.} \\
Fix \text{ in us thy humble dwelling;} \\
All \text{ thy faithful mercies crown.} \\
Jesus, thou art all compassion, \\
Pure, unbounded love thou art, \\
Visit us with thy salvation, \\
Enter every trembling heart.
\end{align*}
\]

This hymn text, truly a prayer, seeks Christ’s presence in our lives so that we can reflect his very nature and character of love as we witness to him in daily life. The poverty of love can be addressed through a daily commitment to read the Scriptures and also to find ways to apply them in our lives. And as a congregation reads Scripture weekly and hears faithful preaching, it can prepare to be a community of faith rich in God’s love for each other, the community, and the world.
If you have been exposed to Orthodox thinking and theology, or to the theology and practice of the desert fathers and mothers, what insights have you gained from this exposure? What of value can you take away from studying them?

**Action Point (do one or more of the following on your own this week):**

- Throughout the week, read the Scriptures from this study daily, with particular attention to God’s loving call to serve one another and to support world mission.
- Form a prayer group centered around reflection on the divine, Trinitarian nature of God’s love. Engage in Scripture study and guided spiritual exercises.
- Commit to one selfless action of loving service each week—and surround your action with reflective prayer to seek and see Christ in those you serve.

— The Rev. John R. Throop, D.Min. is an ordained minister in the Episcopal Church. He serves as Sunday assistant at the LaSalle County Episcopal Ministry, a four-church cluster based in Ottawa, Illinois. He has specific ministries in spiritual formation and intercessory prayer.

**Recommended Resources**

- Check out the following Bible studies at: [ChristianBibleStudies.com](http://ChristianBibleStudies.com)
  - The Gospel & Social Issues
  - 1 Thessalonians: Sharing the Faith
  - Doctrine Is Not a Dirty Word
  - Fresh Ways to Connect with the Gospel
  - Missional Evangelism


**Love Your God With All Your Mind: The Role of Reason in the Life of the Soul**, by J. P. Moreland and Dallas Willard (NavPress, 1997). Makes the case that the redemption of the intellect opens up the whole person to receive and experience the love of God.


**Your God Is Too Small**, by J. B. Phillips (Touchstone, 2005). A Christian classic that asks penetrating questions about human concepts of the nature and person of God, and how that definition is almost always far smaller than God really is.
The Poverty of Love
The desert fathers and mothers would know instantly why our gospel is too small.
By Bradley Nassif

“Is our gospel too small?” Shouldn’t the answer be obvious? As an Eastern Orthodox theologian, my first impulse was to point out that a small gospel has never been our problem. The name of the great 7th-century saint Maximus the Confessor symbolizes the maximal gospel proclaimed by him and all the Orthodox—one with cosmic implications that embraces the whole of creation. Proclaiming that kind of gospel has always been the Orthodox way. But then I came down to earth. Though Orthodoxy has a grand vision in principle, it often doesn’t make a lot of difference in practice. I believe our theological compass is pointed in the right direction, but when it comes to following through on our not-so-small gospel, we are no better than anyone else.

So what’s lacking in all our churches, regardless of tradition, that makes this question so necessary? My thoughts turn to the early 300s, to the deserts of Egypt, Palestine, and Syria, along the banks of the River Nile, in remote caves, abandoned forts and tombs, on mountaintops and pillars. There, men and women took up their crosses to fashion the old creation into the new, to seek the redemption and renewal of our fallen human nature by the power of the risen Lord. These desert dwellers provide us with the wisdom we seek.

The desert fathers and mothers heard Christ’s call to deny themselves, take up the cross daily, and follow him (Luke 9:23) in a time similar to our own. Under Emperor Constantine, large numbers joined the church for the social privileges it bestowed. Many sought status and prosperity more than the cross. This influx of nominal Christians made the church a spiritually sick institution, and a radical illness called for a radical remedy. Ordinary men and women, most of them illiterate, heard the death-call of the gospel and responded by fleeing to the desert to live out their calling, either alone or in community. Peasants, shepherds, camel traders, former slaves, and prostitutes were the first to go.

The desert was not a place of escape as much as a place of countercultural engagement. The desert was the front line of spiritual warfare, as in the Bible, a place of testing and death. It was where the heart was purified, the passions conquered, sin destroyed, and humanity renewed.

Like the prophets of old, the desert dwellers reminded the church that the kingdom of God is not of this world. They insisted that if we confuse the gospel’s values with our culture’s values, it will have lethal results. They exposed the underside of a form of religion that fuels our hunger for self-centered living. Still today, their lives stand against the easy assurance of a too-inculturated gospel. They offer an alternative spiritual order, one based on Trinitarian divine love and human freedom. They offer an alternative portrait of what being human really means. And perhaps most radically, they call us to engage our external challenges by first conquering our own inner passions through the lordship of Christ.

Athletes of God
The monastic movement was a response to the church’s spiritual poverty, the poverty of love. The monks protested that knowledge wasn’t the problem; the problem was love. Their perspective is all the more surprising when we compare the low literacy rate then (perhaps 4 percent) with the high literacy rate now (75 percent). There is more Bible knowledge available now than at any other time in human history. Yet we are still asking, “Is our gospel too small?”

If these desert dwellers were alive today, I believe they would tell us that our gospel is too small because our wills are too big. The core battleground, they argued, is the human heart. They would counsel us to declare war on the inner adversaries that hide secretly in our hearts, and to be watchful of their stealth
attacks. We’re wisest, they taught, when we concentrate our energies on the source of all our problems, the inner person—its selfish orientation, dark impulses, sexual preoccupations, greed, lust, anger, unforgiveness, hatred, and other “works of the flesh” (Gal. 5:19–21). Every believer still has a powerful attraction to sin. So the monks took decisive action in their reliance on God, engaging in the hard work of holiness, something they called *ascesis*, or spiritual training. Some monks were such great trainers, they acquired the name “athletes of God” or “soldiers of Christ.”

At the heart of their training was repentance. They were convinced that their inner natures were so out of sync with the will of God that nothing but a strong dose of God’s grace could fix them. Only repentance could clear away the stony rubble in the soil of their hearts so God’s grace could take root and grow. The gospel was so alive in the monks because repentance was a lifestyle for them, not a single event. Even after spending a lifetime in repentance, we hear them on their deathbeds encouraging the younger ones not to give up: “I’m only a beginner,” they would say. “I’ve just begun to repent!”

All this talk of repentance may sound neurotic, but the fathers and mothers specifically avoided the “deadly thoughts” of depression and gloom. Nor was it their habit to keep dwelling on past sins, as later medieval piety would encourage. They simply knew the depths of their own disobedience, and they took steps to deal with their hearts. The lives of the great desert fathers and mothers of the 3rd through 6th centuries show us how big our gospel can become in each of us when we obey Scripture. The more we keep company with these delightful people, the more they lead us away from relying on external remedies. They tell us that our gospel is too small not because we need to hear more sermons, or do more Bible study, or attend more church services, or create new programs. Nor is it too small because we have not followed modern theological scholars into a nearly idolatrous reliance on the intellect. The monks interpreted the Scriptures not just through study, but also by putting them into practice.

Serapion lamented, “The prophets wrote books. Then came our ancestors who lived by them. Those who came later understood them from the heart. Then came the present generation who copied them but put them on their shelves unused.” I imagine that those reading this article have more Bible knowledge than they will ever put into practice in their lifetime. Yet it’s not more knowledge we need; it’s more love and obedience.

**Trinitarian Love**

Some readers may be wondering whether all this talk of hard work will lead to “works righteousness,” a focus on the self and a dependence on the self’s efforts for salvation and sanctification. But the great monastic leaders disavowed such confusion.

First, they understood that spiritual disciplines in themselves don’t lead to loving obedience. Anthony the Great (4th century) was once asked by a fellow monk who exceeded Anthony in ascetic rigor (which was no small feat, by the way), “Anthony, I fast and pray more than you do, but you are more well known than I. Why is that so?” Anthony replied, “Because I love God more than you do.” Anthony wasn’t bragging. He was just telling it like it was.

When practiced in humility, ascetic rigor results in greater love. The monks fasted because they were hungry to love God more; they prayed because they wanted closer communion with God and neighbor; they contemplated so they could better fix their gaze on their divine spouse; they practiced silence because they wanted to hear God so they could speak and act more wisely to the people around them. The end goal of every spiritual practice employed by the monks was love.

Second, in a treatise titled “On Those Who Think They Are Made Righteous by Works,” Mark the Ascetic says grace is opposed to merit, but it is not opposed to effort: “The kingdom of heaven is not a reward for works, but a gift of grace prepared by the Master for his faithful servants.”
Why, then, did the monks sweat so profusely in the effort to refashion fallen humanity into the new creation? Different fathers answered in different ways, but with the same basic vision. Irenaeus put it this way: “The glory of God is a human fully alive.” Athanasius wrote, “God became human so that humans might become divine.” Together they tell us that we can’t be truly godly unless we’re first truly human. And we can’t be truly human unless we’re in communion with Christ in his Trinitarian relations. Modern evangelical writer Darrell Johnson has said it well in his book *Experiencing the Trinity*: “At the center of the universe there is a relationship. … It is out of that relationship that we were created and redeemed, and it is for that relationship we were created and redeemed.” Our desert disciples would have cheered in agreement.

But we need to aim not at love in the abstract but at love in the particular. Each individual needs to ask herself, “What is it that keeps me from love?” Whether it’s anger, indifference, laziness, despondency, impulsiveness, or an evil imagination, St. Anthony advises us that each corresponding virtue requires its own special tool: “Whoever hammers a lump of iron first decides what he is going to make of it … a scythe, a sword, or an axe. Even so we ought to make up our minds what kind of virtue we want to forge, or else we labor in vain.”

Our resolve to fashion the old creation into the new is weak today because most of us trick ourselves into thinking that our wayward humanity is par for the course. We take “the flesh” in stride and learn to live in peaceful coexistence with its darkening presence. But the words of Jesus would not permit these desert folk to indulge in that delusion. Furthermore, Jesus’ words became a call to arms not just to rein in the flesh, but to transform the heart as well: “For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander” (Matt. 15:19).

**St. Anthony’s Spiritual Advice**

The greatest of these monks wielded enormous power in the ancient world. Because of their reputation for humility and holiness, crowds would flock to see them. Emperors, generals, politicians, as well as the poor, would travel long distances by foot or donkey just to sit at their feet. In Syria, St. Simeon preached atop a 40-foot column, in the process converting Bedouin Arab tribes to Christ. In Egypt, John the Dwarf had an entire town “hanging from his little finger because of his humility.” Some monks’ characters were so transfigured by the Holy Spirit that their sheer presence was enough to effect a transformation in others.

Yet whether a beginner or a seasoned monk, everyone needed advice from a spiritual elder from time to time. The custom in the desert was to ask an elder, “Abba, give me a word that I may live!” This request was for a personal word of wisdom that would open their heart like a key to a locked door. What if I asked Anthony the Great the same question the Christian Vision Project has asked me? If I could get on a donkey and travel to the remote deserts of Egypt to ask, “Abba, give me a word that I may live. Why is our gospel so small today?” I imagine he might answer, with characteristic simplicity: “The poverty of your love.”

—Bradley Nassif is professor of biblical and theological studies at North Park University and host of the Internet podcast Simply Orthodox on Ancient Faith Radio (ancientfaith.com).
How do most non-believers view Christians today? Do they see evidence of a life that stands for something larger than the accumulation of material goods and self-fulfillment, one that has purpose, direction, and invites exploration? Or do they see nothing that makes being a Christian particularly appealing?

We live in a time when calling ourselves Christians demands not only that we privately hold to a set of beliefs, but that we live out those beliefs in such a way that others want to know what makes us different. A life that demonstrates, identifies with, and stands for the truth of the gospel, regardless of personal cost, will have a contagious effect on those who are exposed to it.

Actions speak louder than words.

Scripture: Daniel 3:8–30; Matthew 5:13–16; Romans 12:1–2; James 2:14–26; Hebrews 12:1–7

Based on: “Singing in the Chains,” by Mark Buchanan, Christianity Today, February 2008
Part 1 Identify the Current Issue

Note to leader: Provide each person with the article “Singing in the Chains” from Christianity Today, included at the end of this study.

Rodney Clapp, in his book A Peculiar People, relates a story about the late Henri Nouwen who, as a young man, served as chaplain for a Holland-America cruise line. Nouwen stood on the bridge of the ship one day amid a fog so dense that even the bow of the ship could not be seen. The obscured view obviously created a dangerous and challenging situation for steering the ship safely through the water. As the ship’s captain nervously paced the deck that foggy day, he literally collided with Nouwen. The captain, in a fit of rage, cursed Nouwen and told him to stay out of the way. Feeling incompetent and useless, Nouwen wanted to run away from the situation, thinking his role as chaplain had no relevance to the current crisis. But shortly thereafter the captain asked him to stay around, saying, “This might be the one time I really need you.”

Nouwen likened this experience to the plight of modern-day Christians. Not long ago the Christian worldview dominated culture to the point that Christians were seen as the go-to people, or captains if you will, for perspective and guidance on how to navigate life’s journey. Now, we are largely marginalized from the mainstream of life. We are perceived by many as being “in the way” and irrelevant, except when a personal crisis arises. Though, as Nouwen says, we desire to “touch the center” of men’s and women’s lives, we find ourselves on the “periphery … pleading in vain for admission” to their lives.

Perhaps the reason many Christians feel marginalized in their ability to influence those around them for God’s kingdom is that they have, as Mark Buchanan calls it, a gospel that is “too small”; they’ve become a mere “stump where an oak tree once stood.” The distinguishing characteristic of this pygmy-like gospel might be a lifestyle that blends into culture instead of standing out apart from it. Read Romans 12:1–2.

Discussion Starters:

[Q] What is your understanding of Buchanan’s concept of a gospel that is “too small”? Do you agree or disagree with his assessment?

[Q] In what ways do Christians blend into the culture instead of being distinct from it? How could we become more countercultural in the way we live out biblical principles?

[Q] How do you think the non-Christians you regularly interact with would describe your life? Would they be surprised to know you are a Christian? If so, what might be missing from your life that would make it clearer to them?
[Q] What one value of yours (e.g. honesty, integrity, perseverance, humility, creativity, etc.) do you most want other people to see and interpret as an example of being a Christian? How do you presently try to live this out?

Leader’s Note: Don’t restrict the values discussed to the ones mentioned in the question. Encourage participants to focus on how their witness might look from another person’s point of view instead of on where they are falling short. The idea is to get them thinking about the difference between their own perception of their witness and how others might perceive it.

Part 2  Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching Point One: A vibrant gospel lifestyle is one that demonstrates involvement in the lives of others.

At 3:00 a.m. on March 13, 1964, a young woman named Catherine (Kitty) Genovese was murdered by a man she didn’t know on the street outside her apartment in New York City. She was repeatedly stabbed by her attacker during an assault that continued for 32 torturous minutes in the open quarters of a densely populated area. What made this murder front page news at the time was that 38 of Genovese’s neighbors heard her cries for help and roused themselves from bed to look or curse the noise, but made no effort to help her or call the police. Among the excuses witnesses later gave for their lack of involvement were “being afraid,” “not wanting to get involved,” and “being tired.”

Whether it is a growing sense of apathy, fear of our litigious society, or an exaggerated emphasis on “privacy,” increasing numbers of people seem to shy away from getting involved in other people’s lives. Charles Swindoll aptly captures this cultural slide in his book Strengthening Your Grip. He tells a simple tale about four people named Everybody, Somebody, Anybody, and Nobody. “There was an important job to do and Everybody was asked to do it. Everybody was sure Somebody would do it. Anybody could have done it, but Nobody did it. Somebody got angry because it was Everybody’s job. Everybody thought Anybody would do it, but Nobody realized that Everybody wouldn’t do it. It ended up that Everybody blamed Somebody when Nobody did what Anybody could have done.”

In an era where privatized beliefs are often severed from any responsibility for acting on those beliefs, Christians have a unique opportunity to demonstrate a congruity between their faith and works that will draw others to the gospel. Read James 2:14–26.

Living a Vibrant Gospel Lifestyle
Leader’s Guide

[Q] What do you think you would have done had you lived in Katherine Genovese’s neighborhood and were awakened at 3 a.m. by the cries of an unknown person down the street? What is the likelihood that you would have assumed that others were taking necessary steps to provide help rather than taking the initiative yourself?

[Q] Do you agree or disagree with the statement, “A person’s privatized beliefs are often severed from any responsibility for acting on those beliefs”? If you agree, provide some examples.

[Q] What factors in our busy lives prompt us to ignore the needs of others or rationalize our unwillingness to become involved?

[Q] How is our witness for Christ compromised when our words and actions do not match?

[Q] What does congruity between faith and works look like in real life? Provide some examples.

Teaching Point Two: A vibrant gospel lifestyle is one that clearly identifies with Christ.

In the Old Testament book of Daniel, three of Daniel’s friends—Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego—were faced with a life or death decision. They either had to bow down and worship the golden image set up by the king or face being thrown into a blazing furnace. Read about their response to this mandate in Daniel 3:8–30.

It was not only verbal allegiance the king was requiring of these three men but observable, deliberate action. Their willingness to “bow down” in worship to the image would have erased all of their words and devotion to God previous to that moment. They knew that identifying with God in that moment required them to live out their professed faith in a way that carried a high price.

Though most of us are not faced with imminent death as a test of our allegiance to God, we are still prone to shrink back from identifying with Christ when there is a price to pay. Stuart Briscoe, in his book Getting Into God, makes this point by recounting a personal story about his child. “Years ago I was praying with one of my children at bedtime, and I asked him if he had any problems we should pray about. He couldn’t think of any, even though I could think of a number! Rather unwisely, I pressed the point and asked, ‘Don’t you have any problems at school?’ ‘No,’ he replied quite firmly. ‘Don’t the kids give you a hard time because you’re a Christian?’ Again the answer was ‘no.’ Thinking back to my own traumatic school days, I said, ‘But kids always give you a hard time if you let them know you’re a Christian.’ His reply was frank beyond belief: ‘All the more reason you don’t let them know!’ And quite happily he turned over to sleep.”

Living a Vibrant Gospel Lifestyle
Leader’s Guide

[Q] What types of “golden images” in popular culture are you tempted to “bow down” to? Do you think most Christians realize that these things can compromise their devotion to God?

[Q] Are there people in your life whom you are reluctant to tell that you are a Christian? If so, who are these people? What do you fear might happen if they knew you were a follower of Christ? What might it cost you?

[Q] Buchanan says that being saved and identifying with Christ means knowing a God who empowers us to face the worst and become our best. What do you think he means?

[Q] How might a more overt identification with Christ require you to think differently about the choices you make with money, discretionary time, or relationships?

Teaching point three: A vibrant gospel lifestyle is one that is willing to pay the price to do what is right.

We would do well to read the biographies of Christians who have gone before us, who showed enormous courage and faith and did not shrink back when they encountered severe adversity. Among them are Hudson Taylor, one of the first missionaries to China; Corrie ten Boom, who saved many Jews from extermination during World War II; and Brother Andrew, who smuggled countless Bibles across the Iron Curtain before the Cold War ended.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was another whose life was a testimony to his exceptional faithfulness. He was a Lutheran pastor in Germany during the tumultuous years of World War II, when the Nazi regime ruled parts of Europe with an iron fist. In the early 1930s, Bonhoeffer, along with a dwindling number of other church leaders, took a firm stand against the Nazi-influenced Reich church. At one critical point in the resistance movement, after speaking publicly against Hitler’s tactics, he was persuaded to leave Germany for America to save his life and at the same time pursue further study. But after several weeks of agonizing deliberation, Bonhoeffer chose to return to Germany and face what he knew would almost certainly lead to imprisonment and possibly death. He was compelled to trade his personal safety for what he believed was his calling from God: to fight for truth alongside his suffering brothers and sisters in Germany. From his prison cell he later wrote, "It is not the religious act that makes the Christian, but participation in the suffering of God in the life of the world.”

On April 5, 1944, at 39 years of age, he was executed by hanging at the Flossenburg concentration camp, three weeks before the Soviet capture of Berlin.

Read Hebrews 12:1–7.

[Q] Do you know anyone who inspires you by their fearless devotion to God? Who is this person? What is it about their life that you find encouraging or inspiring?

[Q] Do you consider yourself a risk taker or someone who plays it safe most of the time? If the former, what risks are you currently taking to be more bold in your witness for God? If the latter, what would you need to change in order to take more risks and become a bolder witness?

[Q] Why do you think this type of fearless devotion to Christ is so rare these days, despite the fact that so many in America claim to be Christians?

[Q] How do you think the church can help Christians be more equipped for and/or bold in their witness for God?

Optional Activity:

Have each participant write out at least one way they would like to be more overt and bold in their witness for God in their neighborhood, workplace, or among friends. Then, ask them to design a basic plan for implementing their idea. Ask for volunteers to share their ideas with the group and discuss them as appropriate.

Part 3 Apply Your Findings

Read Matthew 5:13–16. There is a quote attributed to St. Francis of Assisi that says, “Preach the gospel at all times and when necessary use words.”

We live in a time when words are cheap. Everyone has an opinion about every conceivable topic, and it often doesn’t matter whether your opinion is an informed one. The important point is that you express it. That’s what drives much of television programming, talk radio, blogs, and social networking sites. But the words we confess as Christians must include action if our witness for Christ is to have any chance of being distinguished from the deafening chatter of triviality in which our culture is drowning.

Bonhoeffer has the last word on this: “Christianity stands or falls with its revolutionary protest against violence, arbitrariness and pride of power and with its plea for the weak. Christians are doing too little to make these points clear rather than too much. Christendom adjusts itself far too easily to the worship of power. Christians should give more offense, shock the world far more, than they are doing now. Christians should take a stronger stand in favor of the weak rather than considering first the possible right of the strong.”

5 Sermon on 2 Corinthians 12:9.
Action Point (choose one or more to do on your own):

• Consider how you might be compromising your witness for Christ by sending a mixed message to people in your life if your words and behavior don’t match. Once you become aware of those inconsistencies, ask Christ to help you make changes to make them congruent.

• Get involved with a person, group, or cause, and demonstrate your faith in a bold way that publicly identifies you as a Christian.

• Over the next three months, commit yourself to read at least two biographies of Christians whose lives have been a testimony of their great faith and devotion.

— Study prepared by Gary A. Gilles, adjunct instructor at Trinity International University and a Licensed Clinical Professional Counselor in private practice.

Recommended Resources

Check out the following Bible studies at: ChristianBibleStudies.com

- The Gospel & Social Issues
- 1 Thessalonians: Sharing the Faith
- Doctrine Is Not a Dirty Word
- Fresh Ways to Connect with the Gospel
- Missional Evangelism

A Peculiar People: The Church As Culture in a Post-Christian Society, by Rodney Clapp (InterVarsity Press, 1996). Clapp’s keen analysis of the church’s ministry will show you how developing Christian community as an alternative lifestyle can make a difference now and in the future of the church.

Becoming a Contagious Christian, by Mark Mittelberg, Lee Strobel, and Bill Hybels (Zondervan, 2006). A six-session evangelism course for churches and groups of all sizes, designed to equip believers for effective evangelism by showing them how they can share the gospel in a natural and powerful way while being the person God made them to be.

Extreme Devotion: The Voice of the Martyrs, by Extreme Devotion Writing Team (Thomas Nelson, 2002). A collection of prayers, sayings, writings, and brief biographies of sixty Christians who died for their faith.


The Cost of Discipleship, by Dietrich Bonhoeffer (Touchstone, 1995). Bonhoeffer addresses the idea of “cheap grace”: preaching forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, and communion without confession. “Cheap Grace” is grace without discipleship.
Singing in the Chains
To be saved means more than we might think.
By Mark Buchanan

I had a Paul-like conversion.

There were no horses, voices, blindness—no bloody trail at my feet. But it was dramatic. Something like scales fell from my eyes. I stood in the shadow of Christ’s cross and in the light of his resurrection. Christ met me, embraced me, forgave me, and gave me himself. I never looked back.

That was more than 25 years ago. For 18 of those years I’ve been a pastor, a fact that has not yet ceased to amaze me: that God would take me, the worst of sinners, the least of the “apostles,” and make me his chosen vessel to carry his name before kings and gentiles and homemakers and dentists and plumbers and schoolchildren.

How could a gospel that performed such a feat be too small?

I was saved into a midsized Baptist church, suburban in its sentiments, conservative in its theology. It was a world both familiar and strange to me. The music was awful, third-rate lyrics set to fourth-rate melodies, as C. S. Lewis is said to have described the music at his Anglican church. The preaching was interminable and often bewildering, an exercise in splitting hairs over doctrinal points that, until then, I knew nothing about. We signed a members “covenant” to the effect that we wouldn’t drink and wouldn’t chew and wouldn’t go with those who do.

But I loved it. I was taught the Bible, rote teaching methods notwithstanding, and soon enough I could split a doctrinal hair as thin and fine as the next guy. I even started to like the bad church music. But even more, I came to a deeper and deeper awareness of the gift of God, vouchsafed me by no merit of my own: that Christ died for me and lives in me and prepares a place for me. I am a new creation, heaven-bent. I am an enemy of God who, by the Father’s grace and Christ’s work and the Spirit’s quickening, has been made his child and his ambassador.

So how could a gospel that performed such a work not be enough?

Yet I look out week upon week on the congregation I now lead and wonder this very thing: Is the gospel I inherited, and now preach, too small? Is there a stump where an oak once stood? I wonder.

The conversions I witness generally aren’t as radical as they seem to be elsewhere and at other times. Our hunger and thirst for righteousness, the first mark of kingdom-dwellers, is for the most part anorexic, and our lust for self-vindication appears as hearty as ever. Domestic problems seem to be as prevalent among evangelicals as they are among the wider public. The amount of interchurch migration, and the low level of actual net church growth, is embarrassing. The willingness, as the apostle Paul put it, to share in the fellowship of Christ’s sufferings so that we might attain to the resurrection from the dead is at a low ebb in most North American churches.

Is our gospel too small?

Longing to Be Free
Let’s go back to its early days, when the Good News was new news. Let’s go back to a jail in the city of Philippi, to two men sitting in the inner cell, bound in manacles. Paul and Silas. They’re bleeding. Their flesh blooms with welts bright as red roses, bruises dark as purple dahlias. And they’re singing.

I always picture them singing a Wesley tune—“And Can It Be,” let’s say—but know that’s impossible. So
maybe they sang the hymn Paul taught the Philippians: *Let your attitude be the same as that of Christ Jesus … who became in very nature a servant.*

The point is, they’re singing. And the gospel is doing its subversive, transforming work. Before the day’s out (actually, this happens around midnight, so before it’s barely begun), the jailer is on his knees, shaking from stem to stern, begging those two men, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?”

Their answer is beautiful in its clarity and brevity: “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household.”

Good News. The gospel. Just like I heard it, and embraced it, over 25 years ago.

I never want to make the gospel more complicated than that. I want to retain this gospel’s deep simplicity for all time. *Saved* can never mean less than the forgiveness of sins and the hope of eternal life through faith in Christ.

But I wonder if God meant it to be more than this as well. The question that intrigues me is this: What did that jailer understand by the word *saved*? What did he want to convert to? What did he see in Paul and Silas that he himself lacked and now longed for?

Or, put another way, how big was the gospel he so desperately wanted to get in on?

Now it’s possible that the jailer, like Nicodemus talking in the night with Jesus about rebirth, like the Samaritan woman at the well talking with Jesus about living water, is just confused. It’s possible that his question and Paul’s answer are miles apart—that all the jailer means is, “How do I get myself out of this mess?” and Paul seizes the moment to preach salvation.

It’s possible, but I don’t think so. I think the jailer has been listening and watching and calculating all night long. I think Paul and Silas embody something he is afraid to believe “because of joy and amazement” (Luke 24:41). I think Paul and Silas are to him what all Christians are to be to the world: the fragrance of Christ.

**Singing Amid Disaster**

Consider four things.

First, the jailer saw two men counting it all joy when they faced trials of many kinds, men praying and singing in the face of what would have left most men howling and cursing: bodily affliction and personal injustice. Paul and Silas, without due process, were stripped naked and “severely flogged” in public. The Romans had a special genius for this kind of thing (think the flogging scene in *The Passion of the Christ*). It was brutal torture joined to abject humiliation. The beating would scar or even maim them for life. Paul and Silas were summarily tossed in prison, locked in the inner cell, their feet put in stocks. Roman stocks were designed not just as extra security measures, but as implements of torture themselves.

*How would I respond?*, I wonder. How might you? Here’s what they did: “About midnight, Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them.”

Listening indeed. Who among them had ever witnessed such peculiar people, singing and praying in the face of colossal personal disaster? Who had ever heard of a God who, seemingly absent from or indifferent to these men’s suffering, nevertheless called forth from them such pure devotion?

In 2006, five Amish girls, aged 6 to 13, were shot and killed by a man in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, who then killed himself. The event stunned the world. But what happened next stunned the world all the more: a whole community singing and praying. A whole community not bent on retaliation, not shouting with
anger or collapsing in despair, but standing with quiet dignity and deep calm. The community was quick to forgive. They even established a charity fund for the killer’s family. We saw a people face the worst and become their best.

Such peculiar people.

The prisoners and, I think, the jailer witnessed two men like that. And he and they must have understood saved to mean, at the least, having confidence in a God who is with us and for us even when it looks as though he’s abandoned us or is punishing us. It means knowing this God so personally that we have cause to sing even when there is no earthly cause to warrant it.

The more that saved means includes knowing a God who empowers us to face the worst and become our best.

**We’re All Here**

Somewhere in there, the jailer falls asleep. Maybe the singing lulls him. But he’s awakened abruptly by a mighty shaking. An earthquake, powerful enough to fling the prison doors wide, strong enough to shake the prisoners’ chains loose, rocks the house. The jailer wakes, sees what’s happened, and prepares to do what every loyal Roman soldier knows is the noble thing to do: kill himself. Run his sword through his own heart to save Caesar’s representative the trouble. A jailbreak was grounds for executing the prison guard regardless of the circumstances under which the prisoners escaped.

“But Paul shouted, ‘Don’t harm yourself! We are all here!’” This moment more than any other elicits the jailer’s pleading question: “What must I do to be saved?”

This is the point at which the jailer might mean by saved something very different from what Paul answers, but it’s more likely that he’s astonished by what he sees: these men’s compassion for him, a stranger, even an enemy. Why should Paul and Silas care? What possible concern is it of theirs if this man does his soldierly duty? That earthquake looks like a God-thing, reminiscent of Peter’s miraculous, angel-escorted escape from prison (where the guards were executed), reminiscent of the earthquake that attended Jesus’ escape from death’s prison. So why not see it as God’s intervention on their behalf, and whatever will be will be?

Don’t harm yourself. We’re all here.

Such peculiar people. What power could possibly make anyone behave this way? What power is now loose in the cosmos that could break anyone’s addiction to self-protection and self-advancement and make them care, even at great personal cost, about someone they’ve no reason to like and every reason to hate?

The more that saved means includes knowing a God who empowers us, even when it costs us dearly, to love strangers, even enemies.

**Transfixed**

Then there are the other prisoners, sitting there when nothing external—no chains, no bars—holds them anymore. We’re all here.

Why don’t they flee? What’s riveted them to their seats?

I venture this: Paul and Silas have astonished the prisoners every bit as much as they’ve astonished the jailer, and for the same reasons. Up to this moment, it’s unlikely that a single one of those prisoners had ever seen a man get bludgeoned half to death and come up praising God. They’re transfixed by it, wondering what strange power this is that causes men to act at complete odds with common sense. They’re so transfixed, they start acting that way, too.
The jailer sees prisoners going nowhere. He sees prisoners who, hours before, would have seized this opportunity gleefully, without a second thought, now sitting still. If they are not as concerned about the jailer’s welfare as Paul and Silas are, they at least respect Paul and Silas enough to follow their example. The guard sees hard men with hard hearts suddenly acting against their most entrenched instincts, and all because they eavesdropped for an hour or so on two men deeply in love with God.

The more that saved means includes knowing a God who empowers us to subdue the hardest heart.

And maybe there’s one other thing that the jailer means by saved. Maybe he knows what happened in town that day, the events that led to Paul and Silas being beaten and arrested and imprisoned. Maybe he knows that these two men are no criminals. That their crime is not murder or thievery or sedition, but simply and only setting a captive free.

Paul and Silas are in prison because they had pity on a slave girl, doubly enslaved, held in thrall by her earthly masters and the Devil. She followed Paul and Silas around town, giving them one doozy of an endorsement: “These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved.” She spoke the truth, every word. And her endorsement could only have helped Paul’s cause tremendously: she was a local “spiritual authority,” sought for her clairvoyance, her insight into hidden things. By all appearances, the foreign spirit in her was subject to the Holy Spirit of God.

Still, there was a foreign spirit in her. And it troubled Paul. So, in the name of Jesus, he cast the spirit out. As so often happens in the Gospels and Acts, when all heaven breaks loose, all hell does as well. The incident provokes a riot, and the result is that Paul and Silas exchange their freedom for hers. She’s free, at least from the prison of the Evil One, and they’re captive, at least in the prison of the state.

The more that saved means includes knowing a God who defeats the powers of darkness and at the same time makes us willing to forsake our own freedom for the sake of another’s.

Glimpsing Transformation
What must I do to be saved?

Believe in Jesus. Yes. Believe in Jesus, so that your sins will be forgiven and your name written in the Book of Life. Please, let us never, in the name of any fashion or fad in theology, make the gospel less than this.

But what do we mean, what should we mean, by saved? Does it not also include freedom and power, here and now, to live a life so transformed that others glimpse in it the possibility of their own transformation? Please, let us always, in the name of the God who saves us, mean this by the gospel as well.

Arthur Burns, a Jewish economist of great influence in Washington during the tenure of several Presidents, was once asked to pray at a gathering of evangelical politicians. Stunning his hosts, he prayed thus: “Lord, I pray that Jews would come to know Jesus Christ. And I pray that Buddhists would come to know Jesus Christ. And I pray that Muslims would come to know Jesus Christ.”

And then, most stunning of all: “And Lord, I pray that Christians would come to know Jesus Christ.”

Such a good prayer, I’ve started praying it myself.

—As a pastor on Vancouver Island, British Columbia, Mark Buchanan has authored several books including Your God Is Too Safe and The Rest of God.
Is Our Gospel Too Small?

A Whole-Bible Gospel

The Scripture of Jesus is our Scripture, too.

What is one quick and seemingly painless way we often reduce the size of our gospel? We reduce what we study in the Old Testament portion of the Bible—approximately three fourths of the entire book. We sometimes believe it does not have direct relevance to us today as we live out the gospel.

“As a Christian, you can’t fully comprehend the New Testament and its vocabulary (sacrifice, atonement, holy, unclean, blood) without first understanding Leviticus,” wrote Daniel Harrell in his article “The 30-Day Leviticus Challenge.” To live out the gospel in a large way, we need to increase the intensity of how we read and live the Old Testament. This study will help you be more attentive to the value of the Old Testament as a launching pad to the gospel of Christ.


Based on: “The 30-Day Leviticus Challenge,” by Daniel Harrell, Christianity Today, August 2008
Part 1 Identify the Current Issue

Note to leader: Provide each person with the article “The 30-Day Leviticus Challenge” from Christianity Today, included at the end of this study.

The question of the size of our gospel is not solely an issue of New Testament proportions. Every part of the Old Testament is foundational to our understanding of life in and through Christ. Those writings are the Scriptures Jesus read, taught from, and fulfilled. We are called to apply these old Hebrew texts—including ones such as Leviticus that seem to have dubious ties to contemporary times—with a similar level of concentration.

When Christians focus on only one part of the Bible, chances are that part will be the New Testament. After all, that’s where we find the details of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. We can study the details of the early days of the church. We learn how to live a recognizably Christian life. And we learn of what is to come at the return of Christ.

We don’t travel the path of the Old Testament, because we think it is riddled with briars and legalistic bear traps. “Why, we wonder, does the Bible spend so much time on temples, priests, and rules governing sacrifices that no longer even exist? Why does God care about defective sacrificial animals—limping lambs and bent-winged doves—or about a young goat cooked in its mother’s milk, and yet apparently not about people like the Amalekites?” asked Philip Yancey in his article “The Bible Jesus Read” (Christianity Today, January 1999). The Old Testament is a road less traveled, but it is one we must take if we are to embrace a full-sized gospel. Yes, there are plenty of rules, but also a treasure trove of guidance on how to live obedient and fruitful lives. There is another crucial commodity in the Old Testament—the grace exhibited by a loving Father. That is the grace that helped set the table for the gospel of Christ. We can never grasp the immensity of how that gospel came about unless we read the books that tell the story.

Discussion Starters:

[Q] What does your Bible look like? Do the wear and tear patterns on its pages suggest a disproportionate amount of time spent on one Testament or the other?

[Q] How strong for you is the connection between the idea of “gospel” and the contents of the Old Testament?

[Q] What is the first thing that comes to your mind when you think of the Old Testament book of Leviticus?

[Q] Why might details of dietary laws, sacrifices, and the temple mean anything to Christians today?

[Q] If we base our gospel only on the New Testament, how might this affect the size of our gospel?
Part 2 Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching Point One: We need to take Leviticus (and the Old Testament) as seriously as we take the rest of the Bible.

We don’t have to look far to find examples of faithful people who understand the power of Leviticus and who are eager to embrace its teachings. Harrell describes his Jewish friends, who highly esteem Leviticus and explain that it is one of the first biblical books their children learn to read. They recognize that Leviticus quotes God more than any other book in the Bible, and therefore carries unusual authority. The matter is more complicated for Christians, who have two testaments. But the New Testament itself cautions against ignoring the Old Testament, most famously when Paul told his protégé Timothy that the entire Bible has great value in all parts of life (2 Tim. 3:16). The best example of someone who took Leviticus seriously is Jesus, whose citation of the greatest commandment—to love our neighbors as ourselves—is a quote of Leviticus 19:18.


[Q] How can we determine what a passage of the Bible really means? What can we do beyond simply reading a passage to help determine its meaning?

Leader’s Note: After the group shares, this could be a good time to offer a very quick primer on the basics of Bible interpretation. This lesson includes the steps to interpret a particular passage, which are: 1. Determine what the original authors meant to say to the original audience. 2. Identify which of the principles in the text might apply to everyone in every location. 3. Meditate on how we can apply the principles in the text to our lives today.

[Q] Which parts of the Bible do you heed more than you ignore? Why?

[Q] How often is Leviticus preached on in your church? How often is it discussed or studied?

[Q] Leviticus chapter 19 is a long list of laws. Why do you think Jesus, in Mark 12:28–31, picked only one verse from that list and emphasized it?

[Q] How can application of Old Testament laws help us to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength?

Teaching Point Two: The Old Testament, like the gospel of Christ, is a powerful testimony of grace.

The gospel of Jesus Christ has a dual geographic quality. You can find it throughout the world, where we’re told to take it. This gospel can also be located at the intersection of law and grace.
The Old Testament, including books of the law such as Leviticus, is situated in that same general location. Leviticus is full of regulations laid out with great specificity, but is also flavored through and through with the love of God. Living out a large gospel with the attention to detail of Leviticus can help us realize how much we take grace for granted. “Leviticus isn’t in the Bible to show you your need for grace. It’s in the Bible to show you what grace is for,” writes Harrell. “The ancient Israelites were already chosen people before God gave them the Law. The Law’s purpose was never to save anybody. Rather, its purpose was to show saved people how to live a saved life.”


Leader’s Note: The Old Testament system of atonement was based on the blood shed through the sacrifice of animals. The Christian gospel is also based on an atonement through shed blood. This is one precise and vital point where the Old Testament carries forward into the New, laying a foundation for our present-day gospel.

[Q] How do the regulations for a period of atonement found in Leviticus 16 relate to the death of Jesus on the cross?

[Q] How does atonement make us clean of all our sins?

Leader’s Note: Explain that the Leviticus 16 passage is the origin of the term “scapegoat.”

[Q] Why does a confession of sin take place before the act of atonement in the Leviticus passage?

[Q] Identify and discuss the direct link between grace and law found in Titus 2:14. In what ways can we take God’s grace for granted? How does this lessen the size of our gospel?

[Q] Why do certain strict-sounding Old Testament passages take on a different meaning in the light of the gospel of grace?

Teaching point three: Leviticus, like the gospel, shows us the power of obedient living.

People who live big-gospel lives are, well, different. They concentrate on obedient living and emphasize holiness, not to earn grace but rather as a response to the grace they have already received. Leviticus issues a detailed summons to this type of holiness, which leads to sanctification. For its original readers, Leviticus was a call to be more like God. For Christians, it’s a call to be more like Christ. Once a person sinks their teeth into that kind of lifestyle change, other people can’t help but notice and ask them to explain the nature of the change.

Even if no one else notices, living to please God still confers great benefits. One of Harrell’s parishioners who carefully studied the Levitical emphasis on atonement unearthed a need for
confession. The parishioner reports: “I don’t know what I was expecting, but this was not what I was expecting. This was Large. This was a Major Life Event. I spent hours dredging up the muck in my life and preparing my list—and then it was all washed away. Gone. I was walking on air. And all of a sudden, I knew I was in a pretty good place, and I didn’t want to muck it up anymore.”

Read Leviticus 26:11–13.

[Q] What happens when we fight God rather than submitting to him? If you can, give an example from your own life.

[Q] How can daily obedience help us think about our faith in ways that would not otherwise occur to us?

[Q] In what ways would a focus on obedient living change your priorities?

[Q] How can you learn to live in obedience with the Holy Spirit’s power rather than your own? Tell a story about trying to live obediently in your own power. Contrast the results with what happens when you tap into the grace of the gospel and use it to live obediently.

Teaching Point Four: Leviticus helps us enlarge the gospel by living it in community.

A. J. Jacobs, a self-proclaimed agnostic Jew, decided to try an experiment. For one year, he would follow the laws of Scripture as literally as he could. His book The Year of Living Biblically inspired Harrell to ask a group from his congregation to follow the strict dictates of Leviticus for one month. They gained far more from the group experience than they ever could have by doing the experiment as individuals. This acknowledgement mirrors Leviticus, which is, after all, an instruction manual for an entire nation and not for individual people. “So much of what it commands can only be experienced in community,” observed Harrell. “So I would need others to live Levitically with me.” That insight plays forward into the teachings of the New Testament, which does not call for our gospel to be lived as “me against the world,” but rather as “Christians together working to redeem the world.”

Read John 17:15–19.

[Q] How can a group of Christians live out the gospel in ways that individual believers cannot?

[Q] How might this emphasis on community increase the size and power of the gospel? Identify some examples in the New Testament where the early church used the power of numbers to spread the gospel.

[Q] What are the major influences and resources we can call upon as we live the gospel as a body of believers?
Optional Activity:

Have a time of group prayer. Begin by explaining the high priestly prayer of John 17. Pray first, and provide an example for the rest of the group. In your own words, follow the lead of Jesus and ask for guidance and protection as we go out into the world for the gospel, both as individuals and in our various groups. Close the prayer time after everyone has had a chance to pray.

Part 3 Apply Your Findings

What would life look, taste, smell, and feel like if it were lived biblically? One way to find out is to take a 30-day Leviticus challenge similar to the journey taken by Harrell and his church members. As you embark on this journey, pay attention to how well you are able to adhere to all the strictures in Leviticus. Men could choose to grow beards. People could build temples in their living rooms. People could wear linen clothing. The goal, however, is not to live as Old Testament Jews, but rather to live as New Testament Christians in 21st-century America. Therefore, this exercise calls you to pay attention to what these laws tell you about the grace of God and the benefits and difficulties of holiness, and to how they help you better understand the unique gospel vision of Jesus.

Action Point:

On your own, read the entire Book of Leviticus and list all the commandments and laws. Then pick out the 10 easiest and the 10 most difficult to follow. Discuss as a group some corresponding contemporary practices to the ones listed in Leviticus. (When Harrell led his group in the experiment, he gave them the freedom to interpret the Leviticus passages as strictly or as loosely as they deemed fit.)

Identify which practices you will attempt to live out for one month. Share the results of your experiment on a social networking site, such as MySpace or Facebook, or on your church’s website. Help your church plan a congregational Day of Atonement during Lent.
Recommended Resources

- Check out the following Bible studies at: ChristianBibleStudies.com
  - The Gospel & Social Issues
  - 1 Thessalonians: Sharing the Faith
  - Doctrine Is Not a Dirty Word
  - Fresh Ways to Connect with the Gospel
  - Missional Evangelism

- The Year of Living Biblically: One Man’s Humble Quest to Follow the Bible as Literally As Possible, by A. J. Jacobs (Simon & Schuster, 2008; ISBN 978-0743291484)


- Knowing Jesus Through the Old Testament, by Christopher J. H. Wright (Moody, 2000).

- Extreme Devotion: The Voice of the Martyrs, by Extreme Devotion Writing Team (InterVarsity, 1995; ISBN 978-0830816934)


- How to Read the Bible for All It’s Worth, by Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart (Zondervan, 2003; ISBN 978-0310246046)
The 30-Day Leviticus Challenge
One church’s experiment in living the most arcane book of the Bible.
By Daniel Harrell

Mention Leviticus to most people and what comes to mind is that arcane tome of Torah devoted primarily to the proper (and gruesome) management of sin through animal sacrifice. Others may recall mind-numbing instructions on how to rightly handle infectious skin disease and mildew, and a mishmash of other commandments about not mixing fibers and seeds and not sleeping with your stepmother or sister or nephew—commandments deemed either irrelevant or plain common sense. Rarely studied and even more rarely preached, Leviticus often becomes that graveyard where read-through-the-Bible-in-a-year plans go to die. Skeptics know it as ammunition for homosexual haters or as a target for animal-rights activists. Many Jews regard it as awkward and outmoded. To slog through it can be unbelievably tedious. Which is why most of us don’t.

But what would it look like to take Leviticus as seriously as we take the rest of the Bible? For believers in Yahweh, this is no rhetorical question. Inasmuch as we consider the Bible to be God’s Word for God’s people, we don’t have the luxury to pick and choose which parts to heed.

As a preacher who had skirted Leviticus for his entire homiletical career, I was surprised to learn from a Jewish friend that Leviticus ranks among the most important books of the Old Testament. Leviticus is one of the first books observant Jewish children learn to read. Leviticus has more direct quotations from God than any other book of the Bible. As a Christian, you can’t fully comprehend the New Testament and its vocabulary (sacrifice, atonement, holy, unclean, blood) without first understanding Leviticus. The second greatest commandment, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” comes from Leviticus (19:18). “Do this,” Jesus said, “and you will live” (Luke 10:28).

I needed to attempt a sermon series from Leviticus. But rather than preach it straight up (and risk an exodus), I decided to teach it the way I imagine the earliest hearers learned it—by living it out. I would preach a reality sermon series. I got the idea from A. J. Jacobs’s book The Year of Living Biblically. Jacobs, a self-described agnostic Jew, determined to abide by all the strictures of Scripture as literally as possible for an entire year, just to see what would happen. Unlike Jacobs, however, my approach would not be an agnostic one; I would live out Leviticus fully believing that its teaching still applies. But also unlike Jacobs, I wouldn’t do this by myself. Leviticus was addressed to an entire community, not discrete individuals. So much of what it commands can only be experienced in community. I would need others to live Levitically with me.

The Interpretive Challenge
After much cajoling and some well-placed pastoral guilt, I recruited 21 people from our congregation to become Levitical guinea pigs for a month. The idea was not for us to recapitulate ancient Israelite existence. Our attempt at living Levitically would be done as New Testament Christians in 21st-century America.

Customarily with the Old Testament, Christian readers distinguish between what to mind and what to dismiss through a New Testament grid. Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross ended any need for animal sacrifice, and the anointing Spirit of Pentecost rendered obsolete the need for a special priesthood. Yet in making such judgments, the tendency is to overgeneralize. We often conclude that because the Law was written to Old Testament Israelites, and because “Jesus fulfilled the Law,” we’re free to disregard it all.
A Whole-Bible Gospel

The problem is that when you turn to the New Testament, some of the commandments you thought you could ignore are still in force. For instance, in the Book of Acts, Gentile converts are told that while they don’t have to be circumcised, they should still “abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals, and from sexual immorality” (Acts 15:29). The prohibition against sexual immorality we’re familiar with, but no rare steak? Clearly, Christ’s fulfillment of the Law was not a total exemption from keeping it. Ergo, the interpretive challenge.

Our church’s participants were each left to sort out their own interpretive approach. As a result, some chose to keep only those commandments in Leviticus that the New Testament expressly affirms, while others, wanting to be safer, decided to obey everything in Leviticus that the New Testament doesn’t specifically nullify. Some made their decisions by consulting commentaries. Others consulted their Jewish friends. One woman followed a translation of Leviticus written for children. Because we didn’t foreclose on a particular interpretive angle as a group from the outset, participants were freed to try things they might otherwise pass up.

Next came putting the words into practice. It would not be enough to figure out what Leviticus meant. You had to live it—which went a long way in helping to clarify what Leviticus must have really meant. Some people in the group ate kosher and wore linen trousers (in January no less). Just about everyone did a version of Sabbath keeping. Several men didn’t shave. Another went as far as to build a tabernacle in her 600-square-foot apartment as a reminder of God’s presence. One woman remarked how getting dressed each morning suddenly became a very slow and intentional process. “Fast girls aren’t holy,” she discovered.

Other participants tried to figure out corresponding contemporary practices. For instance, if it is the case that a beard in the ancient Near East distinguished you from clean-shaven pagans, then I decided that maybe wearing a huge cross would approximate that in our day. Another person kept the food laws by only purchasing food locally farmed and humanely prepared. Several people, deciding that burnt offerings suggest a need to be aware of sin in a way that we typically aren’t, wrote down their sins for the month, and then ceremonially burned them as a sign of God’s forgiveness.

If the rest of the congregation were to learn from our experiment, they had to be able to observe it beyond just hearing about it in sermons. Therefore, each participant opened a Facebook account and joined a Facebook group we named “Living Leviticus.” Participants posted journal entries, photos, comments, and videos. Daily online activity reminded us that we each were part of a (virtual) community of obedience. Because Facebook is a social networking site, a couple hundred people also joined the group and many more from all over the world logged in to read and comment. A cluster of Messianic Jews even got ahold of our page and began offering their own advice on how to keep Torah.

Among the many lessons from the month, rising to the top was the realization of how much we take God’s grace for granted. Because holiness can be difficult, we default to simply admitting we’re miserable sinners, get our grace, and then get on with living our lives the way we were going to live them anyway. As one participant put it, “I never before realized just how good I am at detaching God from my day-to-day life.” But if reading Leviticus only succeeds in making you feel bad for being a lousy Christian, you’ve missed its point. Leviticus isn’t in the Bible merely to show you your need for grace. It’s in the Bible to show you what grace is for. The ancient Israelites were already chosen people before God gave them the Law. The Law’s purpose was never to save anybody. Rather, its purpose was to show saved people how to live a saved life.

Yet even with grace, living a holy life presents its challenges. One of our observers wrote: “My usual response to Leviticus—and to many of the situations God has placed me in this month—has been to say, ‘This is unfair; why are you making me do this? If you weren’t just trying to be unkind to me, you’d make this much easier.’ The trouble is, sin is always waiting to come in when I open the door to saying that I
shouldn’t have to do what God says. When I am fighting God instead of submitting to him, not only am I increasing that distance between us that robs me of my peace, but I am also making room for wrongs that always come at a cost.”

‘Doing What the Bible Says’
The experiment underscored the power of experiential learning. Study after study shows that active doing rather than passive listening ensures higher retention and application. For several of the men, simply not shaving spurred them to think about their faith every day in ways they had otherwise compartmentalized. Their beards also elicited frequent questions about faith from friends they never knew to be interested in such things. A small group of women were so affected by the way their Sabbath observance reordered their priorities and made space for their friendship that they dedicated themselves to its continuance. Others saw how deliberate attention to food and clothing could take on a spiritual dimension. Everyone was surprised on one level or another at how the practice of simply “doing what the Bible says” led to insights as to why some of the more obscure laws made it onto the books to begin with.

Just as experiential learning was important for the participants, the ability to observe the experiment proved invaluable for the rest of the congregation and others outside our church. Given all that typically takes place on social networking sites, it was rewarding to feel like we were redeeming a little corner of the Internet for Jesus. But more significantly, the ability to follow along day by day increased interest in what was coming each week in the worship service and sermon. The Levites-for-the-month offered verbal and multimedia “testimonies” of their experience during worship and led classes afterward for those interested in learning more. People genuinely got excited about Leviticus!

For the participants in the Levitical experiment, its power for personal transformation was unexpected and perhaps the most rewarding aspect. One wrote, “I had a hard time with Leviticus month. For about 30 days and 18 hours, I groused and complained. … Early in the month I had been reading through the sacrificial section and was convinced that the modern-day, post-Jesus equivalent is confession. This is something I knew about from my Catholic days, but it had never been part of my life. I was not interested in doing this again—but the way I was not wanting to made me think that I really ought to. So I looked up the Episcopal liturgy, made arrangements with an accommodating confessor, took a very deep breath, and jumped in.

“I don’t know what I was expecting, but this was not what I was expecting. This was Large. This was a Major Life Event. I spent hours dredging up the muck in my life and preparing my list—and then it was all washed away. Gone. I was walking on air. And all of a sudden I knew that I was in a really good place and I did not want to muck it up anymore. ‘Okay God,’ I prayed, ‘this is fantastic. I want to stay here. Whaddya want me to do?’”

Needless to say, reading through Leviticus again looked so different in the light of grace.

This post led me to attempt a congregational “Day of Atonement” (Lev. 16) during Lent (without the scapegoat of course). For Protestants unfamiliar with public confession, the practice proved to be a needed one. Many left with similar feelings of walking on air—as well as intentions to be more grounded in God—which is precisely what grace (and the Law) are supposed to do. I couldn’t help but wonder why we tend to view obedience as so burdensome. Could it be that we’ve never really obeyed?

Finally, the participant who built the tabernacle in her apartment wrote about leaving the tabernacle up after the month was over, and then taking it down. She wrote, “I realized I had stopped seeing it. Like a bad piece of art or a roommate’s ugly lamp, this crazy tabernacle that I had constructed to be a daily reminder of God dwelling with me—something I couldn’t ignore if I tried—had become just like another
piece of furniture, part of the backdrop of my life. However, today as I sit on my couch, I am very much aware of its absence. As a New Testament Christian, I know that God’s Spirit is with me today just as much as it was yesterday, but it does feel like something is missing now.

“Leviticus reminded me of the power and holiness and justice and yes, the grace of God. Leviticus shows us that we were created and chosen for a higher calling. That we are the ‘haves,’ not the ‘have-nots.’ That although we often bring nothing but our last fruits, we worship a God who gives us the gift of himself in Jesus. ‘I will put my dwelling place among you. … I will walk among you and be your God, and you will be my people’ (Lev. 26:11-12). You may think I’m crazy, but I’m going to say it anyway: I love Leviticus. Amen and amen.”

—Daniel Harrell, one of the ministers at Park Street Church in Boston, is known for his dry wit and hairpin turns of phrase, as well as his consistent emphasis on grace in unlikely places.
Is Our Gospel Too Small?

The Gospel, a Napkin, and Four Circles

Examine a new way of expressing the gospel especially designed to explain God’s “Big Story” with diagrams simple enough to be drawn on a napkin at a coffee shop.

Today’s young people do not look at the world as their parents did, so the way we express the gospel to them needs to be rethought. But how do we express the gospel in a new way without losing the heart of the gospel—that Jesus Christ’s death and resurrection saves those who trust him from the death and judgment that their sins surely bring?

James Choung, an experienced campus ministry worker with InterVarsity Christian Fellowship in San Diego, has shaped a gospel presentation that can be sketched on a napkin, using four circles that explain the essence of the gospel. What is different from earlier napkin tools is where it begins—with God’s good creation—and where it ends—Christians building the kingdom of God here on Earth.

Scripture: Genesis 1–3; Matthew 6:12; John 3:16–18; Acts 17:22–28; Romans 5:1–2; 6:23; 2 Corinthians 5:17; Ephesians 2:8–9, 11–22; Colossians 1:15–20; 3:1–17; 1 John 3:11–15


Part 1 Identify the Current Issue

Note to leader: Provide each person with the article “From Four Laws to Four Circles” from Christianity Today, included at the end of this study.

Lori and her far-away friend Cathy call each other every Sunday to catch up and talk about life. One week not long ago, their talk about their Christian faith led to a question that stumped them. Lori e-mailed her former pastor with this question:

What is salvation? I don’t mean the typical ... repent, accept Christ, go to heaven, etc. What does salvation entitle us to as children of God? Yes, forgiveness; yes, grace and mercy; yes, a home with our Father—but it has to go so much deeper in what it means for our day-to-day walk. How do we grab it, embrace it, envelope ourselves in it to the point where nothing else matters? What does it look like to “seek ye first the Kingdom” when we have so much “stuff” in our days? What are practical ways to do that when we have to work for a living and clean house and do laundry and just live out the day in oftentimes trying situations with even more trying people? How to let go of self and drown yourself in God without becoming so absorbed that you neglect everything else?

That’s the very question that actually keeps people, especially younger people of the Millennial generation, from even becoming Christians. Those who work among today’s college students find that they are often unmoved by a presentation of the gospel that focuses on what Lori called, “the typical ... repent, accept Christ, go to heaven, etc.” Of course, the gospel of Jesus Christ has always been “foolish” to the world’s “wise,” whatever their generation.

Yet, ever since the apostle Paul, believers have sought to frame the unchanging gospel in a way that engages those around them in a fresh way. In this study, we seek to study how the Bible’s “Big Story” (in the words of our article’s author, James Choung) can be expressed simply and clearly today.

Discussion Starters:

[Q] If you came to faith in Christ as a young adult or later, how was the gospel presented to you? How did you find that presentation compelling? (Not the whole story, just the essential point of the gospel that got your attention.)

[Q] If you had an opportunity to share the gospel with someone, is there a certain approach you would likely use? How did you learn that approach?

[Q] One effective way of engaging people in a gospel discussion in the past has been, “If you were to die tonight and stand before God, and he said, ‘Why should I let you into my heaven?’ what would you say?” Assuming you were speaking to someone who was at least somewhat interested in talking about issues of faith, how do you think that question would
work with people you know today? In particular, how do you think it would work with someone under 30?

[Q] In your observation, how do young adults think differently about the world—its problems, needs, and solutions—than the generations before them?

Part 2 Discover the Eternal Principles

Note to Leader: Give each person in the group a couple of white napkins and a pen or Sharpie. As the lesson progresses, group members should draw the symbols discussed on their napkins. James Choung, who was interviewed for the article this lesson is based on, has written a book where he explains his four circles approach in story form. The book, True Story: A Christianity Worth Believing In, is the source for most of the Bible references and explanations used here. A whiteboard or poster board will allow you to draw the diagrams as you go through the lesson with your group.

Teaching Point One: People ache for a better world.

[Q] If someone opened a gospel door to you by saying, “So tell me what you believe?,” where would you start? What is the first thing you would talk about?

[Q] Read Acts 17:22–28. When the apostle Paul went to Athens, confronting a culture and philosophies that were antithetical to Christianity, how did he begin? Why did he start his gospel presentation where he did?

Leader’s Note: Paul started with the Athenians’ evident belief in many gods, and moved toward his case for the one true God of Scripture, sovereign over all creation.

[Q] How effective do you think this kind of approach would be for people today, especially younger adults? Why?

[Q] Can you tell from the article where James Choung might start his conversations with younger unbelievers?

In his book True Story: A Christianity Worth Believing In, James Choung explains that he had tried starting with the story of creation, but many people think of that as a myth. So he starts “with people’s ache for a better world,” and then returns to the idea of God’s creation.

So, first, in the upper right-hand corner of the napkin, he draws a circle with two stick figures slightly apart, symbolizing the world inhabited by men and women. Draw this diagram in the
upper right-hand corner of the napkin (leader—draw it on the whiteboard).

[Q] After drawing this image, Choung asks a question: “What’s our world like? What do you see in the news?” Imagine you are an unbeliever. How would you answer Choung’s question?

Most people will describe a world in turmoil, full of human suffering and injustice. On the first circle you drew (above), now draw squiggly lines. This represents the idea that the world is damaged. We will come back to this in a moment.

[Q] How do you think unbelievers you know would answer Choung’s next question: “The world’s messed up; that’s obvious. But what’s more interesting is our response. How do you feel about this kind of world?”

Most people are likely to indicate that they feel badly about the world as it is. Choung writes, “All of us long and ache for a better world. And our universal ache speaks of something more. Just like hunger points to food and thirst points to water, so our ache for a better world means that a better world either once existed or will one day exist” [p. 207].

People may not agree with that conclusion, of course, but you can explain that you are simply explaining the Christian worldview.
Teaching Point Two: We were designed for good.

Scan through Genesis 1, and note how creation was characterized after each day’s work.

[Q] Summarize this as though you were explaining it to someone with no particular knowledge of the Bible. Begin, “In the Christian worldview ...”

Choung puts it this way: “In the Christian worldview, God created a good, wonderful world. In the beginning, everything was right with everything else.” In the upper left-hand corner he draws a circle identical in size to the first one, with two stick figures who are touching one another. They do not specifically represent Adam and Eve, but simply people who were intended to be in community and intimacy. Above the circle, write “Designed for good.”

[Q] Choung emphasizes three distinct relationships which God intended us to have. Look again at Genesis 1:29, 2:25, and 3:9. What are the three God-designed relationships we were meant to have, and how are they characterized in these verses?

Leader’s Note: Genesis 1:29 emphasizes that we were designed by God to care for the world around us, and it was designed to provide for us. This connection with the environment resonates especially with younger people today. Genesis 2:25 emphasizes that we were “designed to take care of each other,” as Choung puts it. Here is where our God-given desire for relationships, love, and mutual service comes in. Genesis 2:25 especially emphasizes how we were created to live openly and without shame before one another. Finally, Genesis 3:9 reminds us that we were designed for an intimate and loving relationship with God.
The Gospel, a Napkin, and Four Circles

Teaching Point Three: We were damaged by evil.

So what went wrong, from the Christian perspective? What does Genesis 3 tell us happened to our relationships with the world, with one another, and with God?

Leader’s Note: Genesis 3 explains the fall of mankind, spoiling all three of the God-designed relationships we were created to enjoy. Not only did the natural world become weed-infested, but all relationships with other people were spoiled. That is the source of things like racism, sexism, injustice, and oppression. Most significantly, our relationship with God was damaged, as indicated by how God drove Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden.

On a separate napkin or piece of paper, adapt the circle in the upper right-hand corner to show this. Share your efforts with one another.

Choung first writes above the circle, “Damaged by evil.” He draws the inner circle representing mankind’s relationship with God, but then adds squiggly lines to indicate the damage done. Next he draws a vertical line from the top of the circle to the bottom, separating the two people and dividing the God-circle, to show how our relationships with others and with God are damaged. Finally, he draws arrows from the outer circle toward the inner, indicating how the creation itself “fights back” through natural disasters and all that the “weeds” symbolize in our world.
[Q] How would you answer the next question Choung suggests we ask our non-Christian friend: “Where have you seen the damage in your own life or the lives around you?”

Teaching Point Four: We can be restored for better.

[Q] Now comes the good news of Jesus Christ. Choung introduces this section by simply saying, “But God loves the world too much to leave it that way.” What Bible verses come to mind that you could quote to support that statement?

Without explaining the meaning, in the lower right-hand corner of your napkin draw a circle, again with the squiggly lines around it, indicating the damaged world. Now draw an arrow from outside into the circle, indicating that God came into the world to solve the mess we’ve created. Then slightly above the center of the circle, draw a cross.

[Q] What might you say as you draw this diagram? Would you use any Bible verses? If so, which ones?

Here is where we must make the simple essentials of the gospel clear. God wanted to provide a remedy for our messed up, sin-crippled world, but before he could fix the world around us he had to fix us—to solve the devastating effects of our sin. So God entered our world as Jesus Christ, the Son of God (the downward arrow). Unlike any human before him, Jesus lived a perfect life. Then he gave himself to die in our place on the cross, absorbing all our sin and satisfying God’s justice. Then God raised him from the dead, literally and physically, overcoming not only sin but death itself. Now Jesus offers us forgiveness for our sins and new life. There are several verses you could share here, such as John 3:16–18; Romans 6:23; and Ephesians 2:8–9.

[Q] Remember that sin destroyed three of our essential relationships—with the world around us, with one another, and with God. How does what Jesus did for us address the problem of our damaged relationship with the world around us? Read Ephesians 2:11–22 and Colossians 1:15–20.

[Q] The second damaged relationship is with others. How does the gospel enable us to love and forgive one another? Look at Matthew 6:12 and 1 John 3:11–15.
Since God has forgiven us and given us his Spirit within our hearts, we are both capable and obligated to forgive one another—the first step in restoring relationships. Once forgiven, we can also love others.

To show this, draw two people at the foot of the cross, where we learn to be like Jesus.

[Q] Our most significant damaged relationship is with God. According to Romans 5:1–2, how is that restored?

[Q] What are some of the benefits of a restored relationship with God through Christ?

Leader’s Note: Freedom from guilt, peace of mind, being adopted as a child of God, power for daily righteous living and loving, confident hope of eternal life, freedom from the fear of death, and (of special importance to younger adults) the ability to build God’s kingdom on Earth even now, similar to what Adam and Eve were meant to do in Eden.

Draw a circle around the two people and the cross, representing our restored relationship with God, with no squiggly line marring it this time. Above this diagram write, “Restored for better.” Choung explains that he uses that phrase because it “highlights that God is on a reclamation project, turning the toxic into something useable and livable. The revolution has started to restore a world where evil ran around unchecked, changing what was toxic into something beautiful. One day, this revolution will be complete.”

**Teaching Point Five: Sent together to heal.**

Your napkin now looks like this:

```
Designed for good
Damaged by evil
Restored for better
```
Often, when we explain the gospel to people, the ending promise, the big payoff, is heaven—eternal life. We do not want to neglect that promise, but why might that not be the most significant promise of the gospel to younger adults? What other elements of the gospel might have a stronger appeal for them?

Younger adults today are especially concerned about making a difference in their messed up world. They are much more interested than earlier generations in things like AIDS relief, justice issues, and helping the poor and underprivileged. Understanding that Jesus Christ enables and empowers them to make a significant difference in our world is enormously appealing—and it is a central promise of the gospel. It is what we pray for when we pray, “Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”

This relates to a statement in the interview with Choung: “Your version, though, has a different emphasis from some previous diagrams.”

Draw one more circle, in the lower left-hand corner, but still with the jagged line ‘ruining’ the world. Draw a cross representing Jesus at the center. Now we want to show how the three relationships are restored.

How does our restored relationship with God affect the way we impact the world around us? Read 2 Corinthians 5:17 and Colossians 3:1–17 for help.

Draw an inner circle which represents God’s kingdom and his presence in our lives.

How does the church come into the story? How does our life together as believers help change the world?

We bring salt and light—righteousness and truth—into this world in Jesus’ name. We also have a mandate since creation to care for the environment, and to confront injustice, poverty, and oppression. We do this with the supernatural help of the Holy Spirit, who directs our efforts strategically and gives us strength for the task.

Draw four pairs of people near the inner circle, with arrows leading outward, representing God’s Spirit working through us. Write “Sent together to heal” over the circle.

Near the end of the interview in the article we’ve read, James Choung makes this statement:
“Without the mission in our gospel presentations, we do people a grave disservice. We imply that they can be Christians without being on a God-given mission to love others in his name. And that’s just not true. In Jesus’ summation, we are all called to love God and to love our neighbors as ourselves. In Micah’s version, we are called to act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God. We need to allow the reign of God to continue to grow in us and around us.”

[Q] How would this speak to the question that Lori asked in our introduction?

[Q] How would you answer a person who said, “I don’t see why I need to have Jesus in order to make a difference for good in the world”?

Choung says that he has one more part of the drawing to address this question. We cannot heal our world till our own fallen relationships are forgiven and healed through the gospel of Jesus Christ. He shows that by drawing two lines that are “barriers between the ‘damaged’ circle and the ‘healing’ circle.” He draws one arrow from the “damaged” circle that is blocked by the barrier, and another arrow that points toward the “restored” circle and from there to the “healing” circle. So in the end, your napkin looks like this:
Part 3  Apply Your Findings

[Q] What do you like about this approach to explaining the gospel to someone? Do you think it could help you? Is there something about it you don’t like, or don’t think you could use?

[Q] Explaining this could take awhile. Do you think it would be okay to do this in stages, opening it up gradually over several conversations? How would that work?

Leader’s Note: In Choung’s book, which is a fictional story of someone wrestling with the gospel, he presents this information over a period of weeks.

[Q] Is your church or small group demonstrating this final dynamic of the gospel—building Christ’s kingdom on earth? How? Do you feel a special burden about some particular aspect of building Christ’s kingdom here and now?

Whether we use this method or others, Christians must be ready to explain the gospel to unbelievers in clear and compelling ways. Furthermore, we must listen well to them, so we hear clearly and compassionately their objections and questions. Not everyone is ready to hear the whole story at one time. We follow the Spirit’s leading in these situations, stopping when we sense that things have reached an impasse, and moving forward when we have an open door.

It is especially important to remember that only the Lord can open doors for these kinds of conversations, so we must pray for them. Paul is our model in Colossians 4:3: “And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains.”

Action Point: Draw this diagram for at least one other person—even if it is just to explain it to another Christian friend. However, if you can, ask a friend who is not a believer in Christ if you could share something with them you’ve been trying to learn. (Keep your drawing from this group with you in case you forget something.)

Pray specifically and personally for one another, that God would give each of you open doors to share the gospel of Jesus Christ with someone this week.

— Study prepared by Lee Eclov, senior pastor of Village Church of Lincolnshire, Illinois.
Recommended Resources

Check out the following Bible studies at: ChristianBibleStudies.com

- The Gospel & Social Issues
- 1 Thessalonians: Sharing the Faith
- Doctrine Is Not a Dirty Word
- Fresh Ways to Connect with the Gospel
- Missional Evangelism

True Story: A Christianity Worth Believing In, by James Choung (InterVarsity Press, 2008). In plain, modern, and sometimes earthy language, Choung relates a story that many Christians find themselves in and offers a visual model of the gospel that is easily learned and reproduced.

James Choung recommends these books for further reading:

- The Challenge of Jesus: Rediscovering Who Jesus Was and Is, by N. T. Wright (InterVarsity Press, 1999). Poses the challenge of learning to grow in our understanding of the historical Jesus within the Palestinian world of the first century, while following Jesus more faithfully into the postmodern world of the twenty-first century.

- The Divine Conspiracy, by Dallas Willard (HarperOne, 1998). Willard refutes a “fire escape” mentality of Christianity by exploring the true nature of the teachings of Jesus, who intended that his followers become his disciples, and taught that we have access now to the life we are only too eager to relegate to the hereafter.

- Colossians Remixed: Subverting the Empire, By Brian J. Walsh and Sylvia C. Keesmaat (InterVarsity Press, 2004). The authors explain our own sociocultural context to then help us get into the world of the New Testament and get a sense of the power of the gospel as it addressed those who lived in Colossae two thousand years ago. Their reading presents us with a radical challenge for today from the apostle Paul.

- Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense, by N. T. Wright (HarperOne, 2006). Why do we want justice and fairness? What causes people to enter into relationships? How is it that we long for and enjoy what’s beautiful? Wright makes apologetics accessible to modern seekers by explaining how each of these basic human values leads us to the mystery of God.

- Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, The Resurrection, and The Mission of the Church, by N. T. Wright (HarperOne, 2008). Wright convincingly argues that what we believe about life after death directly affects what we believe about life before death. For if God intends to renew the whole creation—and if this has already begun in Jesus’ resurrection—the church cannot stop at “saving souls,” but must anticipate the eventual renewal by working for God’s kingdom in the wider world, bringing healing and hope in the present life.
To summarize the ‘Big Story’ that your four-circles diagram is designed to tell?

I call the diagram the Big Story because it sums up the plot points of the larger story in which we live and breathe. The most essential parts are the phrases: designed for good, damaged by evil, restored for better, and sent together to heal. They follow the biblical narrative: creation, fall, redemption, and mission.

As I’m drawing the four circles, I’ll tell a story like this: The world, our relationships, and each of us were designed for good, but all of it was damaged by evil because of our self-centeredness and inclination to seek our own good above others’. But God loved the world too much to leave it that way, so he came as Jesus. He took everything evil with him to death on the cross, and through his resurrection, all of it was restored for better. In the end of time, all will be fully restored, but until then, the followers of Jesus are sent together to heal people, relationships, and the systems of the world.

The diagrams you use in your book, True Story: A Christianity Worth Believing In, join a long line of evangelistic tools. What motivated you to create a new one?

I used many of those tools when I became serious about my faith in college, and found that I was the only practicing Christian in my fraternity. When someone was either curious or drunk enough, I wanted to have something ready to share. Sometimes the conversation would go nowhere. But other times, one of these diagrams would actually help someone make a decision to follow Jesus for the first time. And we’d both be surprised!

These tools obviously aren’t magic wands that will automatically cause someone to pledge allegiance to Jesus. But they are aids that offer a clear explanation in a memorable format. And when we’re nervous, having something to hold on to will help us be clear in what we present. Even if we don’t use the tools themselves, they give us helpful reminders to know what’s essential in a presentation and what’s not.

I think of them as modern-day iconography. Icons and stained glass windows helped preliterate Christians understand biblical stories and themes. Evangelism diagrams have the same function today: they help us understand the core message of the faith.

Your version, though, has a different emphasis from some previous diagrams.

Well, what was missing from the diagrams I had learned was anything substantial about one of the most important themes in Jesus’ own preaching: the kingdom of God. I was reading a lot about the kingdom of God, in the Bible and in recent scholarship, but when it came to sharing the core message of the faith, I’d always fall back on an evangelistic diagram that didn’t include it. And it dawned on me: Even though there are tons of books out there about the kingdom of God, very few people will be able to share it with their friends unless they are given some tool or aid—some icon—that will help them remember the key points. So even though I’m not a fan of canned presentations, I felt that creating a diagram was essential to help us understand a bigger picture of the gospel that Jesus taught.
Are you also reacting to a change in the religious landscape, especially among college students?

I've been in college ministry for 13 years now—16 years if you count my student days. And college students today seem really different from when I was in college.

In the early 1990s, most of us were marked by a high level of distrust. So campus ministry meant building trust. It was not easy. I had to beg people to hang out with me even to start a mentoring relationship. And evangelistic approaches back then focused on authenticity and community. The overriding spiritual question of the day was: What is real?

But the so-called Millennials (Generation Y) on campuses today seem much more trusting. Freshmen come in looking for mentors. And they're a civic generation. They're ready to volunteer, because they really think they can change the world. They're far more optimistic. And our evangelistic approaches that have worked are far more civic as well, such as dealing with the AIDS pandemic or sex trafficking. Our best approaches mix global concerns with spirituality, and many people come out for it.

The overriding spiritual question today is: What is good? What will really help the planet be a better place? And our faith better have an answer for it to be relevant today.

At the same time, the environment on campus can shift quite quickly. Just in the last five years, my sense is that campus culture has turned against Christians. People seem more negative about Christians than at any time I can remember since the scandals of many Christian television personalities in the 1980s. We are perceived by many as intolerant, overpolitical, and homophobic. We have to work hard to overcome that.

Wheaton College evangelism professor Rick Richardson has observed that the best evangelistic strategies challenge contemporary idolatries—for example, Campus Crusade’s Four Spiritual Laws challenged the idol of the autonomous self. What idolatries does the Big Story take aim at most directly?

The heart of the real challenge is in the parallel lines that prevent going straight from Circle 2 (damaged by evil) to Circle 4 (sent together to heal). In our field-tests we found that many people want to jump right to the mission of healing and restoring the world. They say, “We want to be about healing the world, but why does it have to be with Jesus?”

But our diagram says, “No, you can’t do this without Jesus. We need Jesus to help us become the kind of good we want to see in the world. Only he can fully help us put to death our self-centered ways so that we can truly live. So if you really want to be a part of healing the world in a way that lasts, you have to go through Jesus.” You have to go through Circle 3. It’s at this point that we may bring up Christian history that many have forgotten—that Christians have been at the forefront of lasting social change, such as the abolitionist movement and women’s suffrage and the civil rights movement.

But it’s here that people will walk away from us and say, “I like everything you’ve said, but I still don’t see why Jesus needs to be a part of it.” The postmodern idolatry is that all spiritual ways of life lead to the same place. Any local truth is a valid truth. In the postmodern mind, they’re all paths to being good and doing good.

But we are asking people to “repent”—literally, to “change their mind” or to have a new way of thinking, to see that they need to let their selfish lives die with Jesus—so they can have a new life of loving him and their neighbor. That’s a huge call to faith for this generation.
How does sin—a central part of the biblical vocabulary—enter into your presentation of the gospel in the Big Story?

Evangelicals have traditionally assumed that we have to start every gospel message by helping people see they’re sinners. If we don’t, then we can’t move on to salvation or how Jesus gives them assurance that they will be in heaven when they die.

It’s not that this message isn’t true, but the approach is jarring. We haven’t created any common experience or authority so that our message will have any weight. We just come out and say it’s the truth. And in a postmodern setting, that sounds arrogant. How do we know it’s the truth? Have we ever been to heaven?

So at the beginning of the Big Story, we instead talk about our common perception: the world is not the way it’s supposed to be.

We all agree with that. And we all agree that it makes us sick to our stomachs when we think about it. No one thinks that our world is great as it is. We hunger for a better world. And up to this point, there is no disagreement. We all experience this.

It’s from this point that we can move on and say that our hunger actually must be evidence that a better world did exist, or will some day. Because our hunger points to food, and our thirst points to water—shouldn’t our hunger for a better world point to something? And then we can share that the world was “designed for good.”

But we still come back to the concept of sin in the context of a broken world. Each person contributes to the mess. We all do. And when we present sin in the context of the results we see in the world (instead of, to a postmodern, an arbitrary set of rules that one tribe happens to live by), then our sinfulness is much easier to accept. It’s still sin: our failure to love our neighbors is ultimately our failure to love God. And then sin seems much deeper and more real. And our need for a Savior becomes stronger, not weaker.

Jesus’ invitations into the kingdom seem to be summed up in a couple of words: “Follow me.” Jesus didn’t always require people to see the depths of their sin before they started a journey with him. They just needed to be willing to change.

How do you hope this tool will change the way Christians themselves think of evangelism?

I hope we will move from decision-oriented presentations to ones that have more to say about transformation. As we were developing the Big Story, we wanted a diagram that wouldn’t just be binary—in or out—but would represent the journey that all of us are on.

We also wanted to move from an exclusive focus on the afterlife to the mission-life. Immediately after Jesus’ invitation, “Follow me,” he added, “I will make you fishers of men.” From the outset, he gave his disciples a mission. Without the mission in our gospel presentations, we do people a grave disservice. We imply that they can be Christians without being on a God-given mission to love others in his name. And that’s just not true. In Jesus’ summation, we are all called to love God and to love our neighbors as ourselves. In Micah’s version, we are called to act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God. We need to allow the reign of God to continue to grow in us and around us.

That’s not to say that life after death isn’t important. But it’s not the whole story. It’s the final chapter, but there are still many chapters to be lived out.
Tools are pragmatic things, so here is a pragmatic question: Has this tool worked?

We have been field-testing it for several years, and the answer is yes, it has. We have had people come to follow Jesus through this. One of my favorite stories comes from another student, who had met a self-proclaimed atheist. After sharing the diagram, the atheist said, “I knew God would be like that.” And they met together to study the Scriptures after that. A skeptic became a seeker.

In partnership with InterVarsity, World Vision, and La Jolla Presbyterian Church, we were able to put up massive tents on our eight San Diego campuses to raise awareness about the AIDS pandemic and how spirituality fits into the picture. We presented the Big Story at the end. If we had come with a more traditional approach, it would’ve felt like a bait and switch, but instead, the Big Story felt very much in line with the global concerns we were exploring.

Equally important, this tool has a message that Christians are proud to share. We see Christians who don’t fit the stereotype of an evangelist and haven’t really shown any previous interest in sharing this story, share this message immediately with their friends and even strangers after being trained. For them it finally feels like good news, so they share it.

Ultimately, I don’t think I’m saying anything new here. If it were new, I’d be a heretic. This diagram has come out of my love for Scripture and the desire to share the whole story that I’ve found in it. It’s the same old gospel truth, the one we embraced when we first started walking with Jesus. None of us fully grasped the whole truth when we started our spiritual journeys, and if we’re honest, we still don’t. But each day, we see something more fully and more clearly. And we’ll find that it’s the same gospel that’s been in these pages of Scripture for a long, long time.