

# LESSON ESSENTIALS

## INTRODUCTION TO EVANGELISM

### LESSON 7: COMMUNICATING WITH YOUR AUDIENCE

A good message isn't just about great language skills and an engaging personality. Read on to find out what makes for a good message that is easily understood by your audience.

This lesson will show you how you can deal with three main communication barriers – cultural barriers, language barriers and literacy barriers, before you start preaching the Gospel.

You might have great intentions of reaching out to the lost, but don't let barriers come in the way of your goal. Effective communication starts with identifying and overcoming barriers. Here's how you can get started.

The Apostle Paul said  
“For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the Gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.”

1 Corinthians 1:17

Have you ever sat through a long, boring sermon where your local preacher bored you with theology and you tried not to yawn? While there could be various reasons for your lack of interest, it could be assumed that the preacher didn't know the how to bridge those communication barriers. Complex doctrines or eloquent sermons aren't always the best way touch someone's heart. Paul says, 'For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.' (1 Corinthians 1:17). Instead, it is important to connect with your audience by tailoring your message to you their abilities and interest.

When you are communicating a message, it is important to think about whether or not people understand your message. Just like Jesus, you ought to be an audience-sensitive communicator. Jesus effectively interacted with His audience and readily answered the questions they had. In Mark 4:33 we read, “With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it.” He did not give His listeners a complicated and elaborate message, but patiently reached out to them with creative stories and parables.

It is important to consider possible communication barriers when we are preaching the Gospel. One that is very important is cultural barriers. Every group of people has a specific culture, even if you share nationality, race and religion. Other aspects of culture include values, social status, economic status, and family background. We cannot ignore the local culture through which people filter or interpret a message. Using the knowledge you have about the people you are ministering to, try to think of how they might understand your message. What makes them who they are and how would they understand your message? Are there aspects about the Gospel that would mean a lot to them but may not be included in your message?

The Apostle Paul was very mindful of cultural barriers while sharing the Gospel message. In Acts 14, we read of Paul and Barnabas in Lystra, among the Gentiles who were followers of Greek mythology and superstition. After Paul healed one of them, the locals declared the two men to be gods. There was a cultural barrier here as the people believed in many gods and so it wasn't hard for them to believe Paul and Barnabas was two of them. However, Paul responded to what they were saying and then told

them about the living God, and related Him to some of the blessings they usually credited their gods for.

On the other hand, earlier in Acts 13, while sharing the message to a Jewish audience, Paul used a different strategy altogether. He started with the Scriptures, which the Jewish people would have known very well, and used them to show how Jesus was the Messiah that had been predicted in those Scriptures. We also need to be aware of the culture of the people we are preaching to so that we can use the style that is most understandable to them.

The next barrier that you need to be aware of is language. The people you are speaking to may not know your language very well, or they may speak a different dialect than you. This can be very difficult, especially when their vocabulary means something different than yours. For example, if the common meaning of the word 'salvation' in their language is different from its Biblical meaning, your message is likely to fail to be received correctly. When you know that this is a challenge, slow down your message. Take time to explain what you mean, especially the difficult concepts or words that are not widely used, and which your listener may not be well-acquainted with. If they don't know your language well, speak slowly and clearly. Also, ask your listener questions to make sure they have understood correctly. Don't be so eager to tell your message that you forget to check if they understand! When you are speaking in front of a group who may not speak your language well, it might be helpful to see if there is someone who can translate for you.

One other communication challenge that you may face is the literacy barrier. Even today, a large number of people learn through oral communication instead of reading – this may be by ability, preference or cultural practice. Because of their method of learning, there is a significant difference in the way they receive and process information. For oral learners, storytelling, practical examples and real descriptions are preferred over lists of theological or philosophical points.

You can loosely categorise people as oral communicators (who may be unable to read or write or who simply have a strong preference for oral communication) and literate (who have had some schooling and prefer to learn by reading and writing). These are two very different styles, but most people are somewhere in the middle. Research tells us that oral communicators not only

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learn by hearing but also by observing and imitating. They think about and discuss events. They value tradition and use stories to remember information and memorize their past.

The highly literate communicators, on the other hand, not only learn by seeing, but also by reading, studying and analysing information. They like to talk about words, concepts, and principles. They like to store information that they can access anytime through printed materials, notes, or electronic devices. They like logic, facts, and tend to also look for new information. So, when a highly literate person preaches a three-point sermon to an oral audience, they might not be able to keep up with or remember everything he says. He would do much better with stories, songs, poems and parables to share the message. In fact, many modern-day evangelists use this method of teaching. They communicate the Gospel message through Biblical stories and then talk with their audience. The advantage with Bible stories is that you can put them in any art form such as music, drama, or even a movie.

We also have to remember that a captive audience isn't proof of a message successfully delivered. Sometimes, it is a polite group of people who will listen to your words but never apply them to their lives. In fact, it is quite difficult to know if you have effectively delivered your message. Some clues would be examining people's knowledge or attitude toward the subject, as well as if we have seen a change in understanding and attitudes. Sometimes, though, we will never know – we may not ever see if people's actions have changed, but their hearts could be changed. In truth, all we need to do to explain the truth the best that we can, rely on God's strength, and be aware of our audience, particularly regarding communication barriers.

Evangelism can be a challenge – but know that we are not alone. God equips us for the task and goes with us as we share the truth of the salvation that is offered in Jesus Christ. Go, in God's power and preach the message to every corner of the earth!

## IN REVIEW

- As a communicator you need to be aware of your audience and identify possible communication barriers.
- You need to be aware of the cultural background of the people that you're communicating with, so that you can use a style that is understandable to them.
- If they exist, it is important to do everything you can to identify and reduce language barriers, because it can determine whether or not your message is understood.
- You need to be aware of the difference between literate and oral communicators, and change your speaking style to match their communication style.

## HAVE YOUR SAY

- What are some of the communication barriers that you have encountered in preaching the Gospel? How did you deal with them?
- What are some of the language barriers that you have experienced in communicating the gospel? What approaches do you or could you take to overcome them?
- What lessons have you learned when communicating to literate and non-literate audiences?

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