

Chapter Five: How to prepare and deliver a message that impacts non-Christians

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Going after the lost sheep in your messages

There are three kinds of crowds that a Christian preacher is most likely to speak to:

- 1) An all Christian crowd.
- 2) A primarily non-Christian crowd.
- 3) A primarily Christian crowd, but with many non-Christians present.

This chapter focuses on preaching to the last kind of crowd: a primarily Christian crowd, but with some or many non-Christians present. The setting I envisage is primarily a Western one (which implies a basic level of education in the hearers).

(Although this chapter does not deal with preaching to a primarily non-Christian audience, perhaps you'll benefit from listening to some talks which were geared toward primarily unchurched people: listen to one or two of the God Sessions mp3s found here: www.friends-first.com/FREERESOURCES/Stuff4churchleaders/GodSessions.aspx.)

Why we're crazy to neglect unchurched people in our Sunday preaching

The main burden of this chapter is that *we should preach in such a way that impacts Christians and unchurched people at the same time*. Here are six reasons that I believe this should be so. I state the first two, and then include a lengthy blocked quote of Tim Keller (who preaches every week to a 20% unchurched gathering of 6000 people in New York City) in which he gives the last four reasons...

1) *We're meant to reflect Christ's heart*. If we don't give some focus to the unchurched people in our message I believe we fail to reflect the heart of Jesus as revealed in his story of the Lost Sheep (Luke 15:1-5). Here is my main assertion: *if there are even a tiny percentage of non-Christians present they deserve some substantial focus in both your preparation and your message*. Jesus gives us a basic theology for this in the story of the shepherd who leaves the 99 sheep in his courageous, committed pursuit of the one lost sheep. Jesus literally suggests that from time to time we 'neglect' the saved to focus on the unsaved. Surely this applies to our preaching too. Of course, this runs contrary

to our instinctual thinking which often sounds like this: 'There are 99 saved people here, and only one unsaved person here. So I will give 99 percent of my energy and focus to the 99, and one percent to the one.' But it seems Jesus instructs us to give them a far greater focus than that.

2) *Unchurched people often think they're not welcome in our meetings.* As we focus on the unsaved in our message, we let them know they are welcome. We send a clear message to them: 'You're welcome here. You can come any time. This is the kind of church that can help people like you.' Interestingly, many of them will even invite other unchurched people along with them in the future once this is clear to them.

An excerpt from pages 22 in 'The Cutting Edge Journal', Winter 2007 (freely downloadable from www.vineyardusa.org/publications/cuttingedge.aspx):

3) *In Acts 2 and 1 Cor 14:23 we see non-believers attracted and challenged by worship.* We learn there that non-believers are expected in the worship gatherings of Christians, and that non-believers should find our worship gatherings challenging and comprehensible. It is crucial to include both Christians and non-Christians in the same service—even in many of the other meetings and ministries of the church. It's more biblical not to segregate them, as in Seeker churches, but rather to have 'mixed' groups.

4) *In a "mixed" group, when the preacher at times speaks somewhat more to non-Christians, the Christians present learn how to share their faith.* This is extremely important today. It is becoming increasingly difficult for Christians to just share the gospel without doing apologetics. The old, canned training programs cannot prepare a Christian for dealing with the range of intellectual and personal difficulties people have with the Christian faith. They need to hear the preacher week in and week out dealing winsomely and intelligently with the problems of non-believers.

5) *On the other hand, when the preacher speaks more to Christians, the non-Christians present come to see how Christianity "works".* More deeply secular, postmodern non-Christians tend to decide about Christianity on more pragmatic grounds. They do not examine in a detached, intellectual way. Rather, they are more likely to make their commitment through a long process of mini-decisions. They will want to "try Christianity on", see how it fits their problems and how it fleshes out in real life.

6) *If you speak and discourse as if unchurched people are present eventually more and more of them will find their way in or be invited.* Why? Most Christians, even when they are very edified in church, know intuitively that their non-Christian friends would not appreciate the service. What you want is for a Christian to come to your church and say, "Oh! I wish my non-Christian friend could see (or hear) this!" If this is forgotten, soon even a growing church

will be filled with Christians who commute in from various towns and communities far and wide rather than filling up with Christians and seekers from your church's immediate neighborhoods.

Let me say more about Keller's last point...

Charles Spurgeon wrote, 'It should be our ambition, in the power of the Holy Ghost, to work our entire church into a fine missionary condition.' He also said, 'If any minister can be satisfied without conversions, he shall have no conversions.'

Charles Spurgeon grew his church to over 5000 simply because every single message he preached, he included enough to help sinners be saved. But where did his conviction to do so come from? It was borne out of years of visiting churches as a not-yet-saved young man and hearing messages that never told him enough to be saved. The first message he did hear the Gospel was the message that led him to trust in Christ.

When he led his own church, Spurgeon always preached in a way that helped Christians and non-Christians at the same time. He preached in such a way that Christians knew this was the right place to invite their unsaved friends and family to - no wonder he preached to an estimated 10 million people in his life, mainly in Sunday messages in his own church.

I have a non-Christian friend in another city who said they were willing to visit a church. So I requested that a Christian friend of mine take them to church with them. After two months they hadn't invited this person yet. So I phoned them and asked why. Here was the sad answer: 'The preaching in my church is okay if you are a mature Christian, but it just won't be helpful to an unchurched person. I think it will put them off.' That experience made me determined to preach in such a way that any unsaved people could be helped.

Seventeen tips to help you impact the unchurched in your messages

A brief disclaimer: these tips seem to be true of the Friends First context of the Southern Suburbs of Cape Town, but they may not all be equally applicable to your context. However, most of it will be applicable to your context, especially if people generally are educated.

1) Cultivate expectancy that the lost will be saved

Charles Spurgeon said that if we don't expect people to be saved, then they won't be saved. It is in the preacher's personal prayer and in the prayer-life of the church that we need to 'pray until assurance comes' that lost people will be saved.

In Acts 2:47 it says that God added to their number daily those who were being saved. I remember in Friends First when we started praying: 'God, we don't have faith that you can add someone to our church every day. But we are ready to believe that you can add someone to our church every week.' Perhaps we need to keep a phrase alive in our leadership and in our prayer meetings: 'Every Sunday a harvest Sunday.' It keeps us alert to the reality that God is pursuing the lost intentionally, and so should we.

2) From time to time listen to and learn from the more experienced

It is acceptable to be inspired by all kinds of preaching, but if you want to attract and reach the lost in your preaching then don't imitate 1) the style of preaching that happens in Christian conferences or 2) the style of preaching in large churches that have grown almost totally by transfer growth. Let me explain why I say this.

1) Often, the most inspirational kind of preaching most Christians experience is at Christian conferences or Leadership Training events. These times can be wonderful. But we must be careful not to then say, 'Wow, so that's how you preach.' The reason is simple: the kind of preaching happening at these events is geared toward Christians alone. To imitate this kind of preaching will not necessarily help you to engage non-Christians. Rather we should develop the kind of preaching approach that will attract and include and reach non-Christians too.

2) Also do not imitate those churches that have wonderful preaching (from our Christian perspective) but have grown primarily from transfer growth, which means that Christians have transferred from other churches or cities. All that kind of preaching shows is that it effectively attracts Christians, but it does not necessarily attract non-Christians.

If you want to imitate aspects of someone's preaching, then look for those churches that have grown largely by conversion growth, where unchurched people have consistently been attracted and reached by their messages.

There are no doubt thousands of preachers all around the world who have managed to really impact unchurched people, while at the same time impacting the Christians committed to their own church. The four that I am most familiar with are:

- 1) Andy Stanley of North Point, Atlanta. Go to www.northpoint.org/messages.
- 2) Mark Driscoll of Mars Hill, Seattle. Go to www.marshillchurch.org.
- 3) Rick Warren of Saddleback Church, California. Go to www.pastors.com/en-US/FreeSermons/FreeSermons.htm.

4) Tim Kellar of Redeemer Church, New York. Explore some of his Sunday sermons found on www.monergism.com/thethreshold/articles/bio/timkeller.html.

I recommend listening to one of their recent Sunday messages from time to time and asking yourself this question as you do, *'What can I learn about how to preach in a way that impacts non-Christians present in the meeting?'*

Of course we should never fully *adopt* anyone else's style of communication. Rather, we should *adapt* some of their style and approach, but never adopt all of it. When one looks at the many preachers God uses, it is amazing how diverse they are.

3) Don't only aim at getting unsaved people saved in the next meeting you have, but aim also at getting them to come back again the following week

It is wonderful when people get saved. But we must remember that most people in our culture will not get saved the first time they come. They are just too far away from crossing the line of faith to cover that much ground.

There are many people who are instantly converted to Christ, but most people who come to faith seem to make many mini-decisions over a period of time, so that, over time and accumulatively, a major decision toward Christ has been made. This insight calls churches to patience in their longings to see the lost saved.

So the goal should not be to preach in such a way that all the unsaved get saved now, but that unsaved people say to themselves, 'Wow. I'm not sure I buy all this stuff, but that message really spoke to me and got me freshly curious. Maybe these people have something I want. I'll come back next week.'

Instead of only asking, 'Did my unsaved friend get saved today?' we should also ask, 'Does my unsaved friend want to come back?' It is not hard to figure out that if they just keep coming, then it is likely that over time they will respond to the Gospel.

4) Keep working on your preaching

Christians are big-hearted and gracious people. They will happily endure average preaching. They usually will feel relationally connected to the preacher in some way and will overlook clumsy and ineffective preaching.

But, and this is a hard one to hear, unchurched people could not be bothered with spending 30 to 50 minutes hearing someone speak in a way that they think is boring, all-over-the-place, not-interesting, too-long, not-captivating,

information-overloading, or lacking force, warmth, joy or perceived relevance. After all, they don't only evaluate *what* you say, but *how* you say it. They probably won't come back if they think some of these negative things about your message.

Do you want to grow your church? Then work on your preaching. There is no one function in the life of a church that has more leverage to either grow or shrink a church than the quality of the preaching. You simply must work on it. Never excuse poor communication with, 'It's just my style.' Find out what weaknesses exist in your preaching and then work on them.

The single best way to increase the effectiveness of your preaching is to test-run it on one or two people days before who can give you feedback and, so doing, help you to improve it.

5) Keep your messages at an introductory level of Christianity

Great preachers never stop preaching every message with the assumption that this is new stuff for many people here. Only academic and out-of-touch preachers forget that. Jesus, it seems, kept on preaching at an introductory level his whole ministry. Martin Luther wrote, 'When I preach, I regard neither doctors nor magistrates of whom I have over forty in my congregation. My eyes are on the servant maids and the children.' Wow.

One reason many unchurched people visit once and decide to not come back again is that they are intimidated by advanced content of the message. They spend most of the message not understanding what is being said and begin to feel like they definitely don't belong here. As an example of this, let me share a story. I invited a non-Christian friend to church and someone preached an easy-to-understand message. I asked him how he experienced it. His response: 'As a young teenager I went to church many times and I always could not make sense of what the preacher was saying, and eventually gave up. But this is the first time I understood it - if only I heard this preacher when I was younger.'

Of course, there are settings for preaching that focus on more advanced Christians with more advanced content - but Sunday gatherings are not suitable for that. I suggest that you do that kind of preaching somewhere else in the life of the church, whether in a Bible institute, or in a leadership environment. But Sunday gatherings need to factor in beginners.

Our job is to make the kingdom of God accessible to people, and yet when we preach in highly advanced and intellectual ways, and assume people understand, we will preach over their heads. New people will feel confused, bored and intimidated and won't want to experience something like that again.

As a little aside here, saying things like, 'We all know 1 Corinthians 13' or 'You should understand the Trinity by now' or 'Why haven't you brought your Bibles?' are unhelpful.

Be very careful of going into too much detail when opening up the Scriptures. Listen to Michael Eaton's counsel in this regard: 'Just as a good housewife likes to serve a good meal rather than display her pots and pans, so the good preacher is concerned with the 'good meal' of Scripture, rather than the pots and pans of dictionaries, Greek language, theological theories, background data and disputed interpretations.' James Denney writes, 'If you shoot over the heads of the people listening, you don't prove anything except that you don't know how to shoot.' Someone else said this, 'You're not called to feed giraffes. You're called to feed sheep.'

Obviously, the more intellectual the culture you are trying to reach the more intellectual your messages need to be. Tim Keller of New York city and Mark Driscoll of Seattle are both highly intelligent preachers, who show they have done their homework when preaching. But having said that, we need to work hard to still keep truth accessible and simple.

6) Prepare your message with one or two unchurched people you know in mind, and then preach it like they're actually there listening

My single most important advice is this: prepare your message as you normally would, and then think of an unchurched person with whom you have recently spent time and imagine that they're in the crowd you're soon to preach to, and ask yourself, 'How will this message as it now is, come across to them? What can I add or remove or restate in ways that will be more helpful to them?' Then, in light of these answers, over-haul your message.

I will give you an example of how I recently did this. On Friday, I prepared my Sunday message on theme of, 'Drinking of the Spirit in your devotions', which was meant to help our church depend on and delight in the Spirit more in their devotions. What helped me was Saturday: I spent the day with an unchurched couple showing them the city, and then that evening invited them to come hear me preach the next morning. When I got home, it dawned on me that in my preparation I forgot that there might be non-Christians in the crowd that I needed to somehow impact in my message. It dawned on me that as helpful as my message would be to Christians, it would certainly not be helpful to non-Christians. So I began to over-haul it. I had prepared a message on Jesus' invitation, 'Come to me and drink' and in my message I had focused on how Christians need to respond to his invitation daily. So what I did was to add a 6-minute section where I applied this invitation to not-yet believers and I spoke on the thirst for forgiveness and meaning. And while I prepared I picture this couple sitting in front of me. The next morning they came and I preached my

message, and wonderfully at the end the guy lifted his hand inviting prayer. I did not take this as a salvation response, but I went to him and asked him how he had experienced the message. His words were so rewarding to me, 'Terran, the part of the message that really spoke to me was the part where you spoke on forgiveness and meaning. If I lived in Cape Town I think I would start coming to this church.' I don't tell this story to boast, but to inspire.

(If you want to listen to the message I'm referring to, download it: www.friends-first.com/content/uploads/sunday%20talks/DrinkSpirit.mp3. Listen to the part between 6,5 and 12,5 minutes in.)

As you overhaul your message and add new parts in, remember to remove some dispensable parts, or else your message will be too long.

The only way to really preach to unchurched people well is to grab all the opportunities you can to spend time with them. By being with them, you have a better sense of where they are coming from, and this will help you speak to them more effectively.

7) Avoid jargon generally

There are two kinds of jargon that are, most often, unhelpful: 1) theological jargon and 2) church-culture jargon.

Theological jargon includes words like *the Trinity, redemption, justification, regeneration, intercession, authority of God's Word, inspiration of God's Word, revelation, salvation, sin, God's wrath, repentance, works, evangelism, witnessing, Spirit infilling, new birth* and more. It is a good exercise as a leadership team in a church to find ways of explaining these terms to beginners. If you find it hard to say it in simple words, then heed CS Lewis's perspective: Not being able to say it in simple words shows that you never understood the word / term in the first place. Ouch.

In my context, *church-culture jargon* includes words and phrases like *LTT, GTT, anointed, anointing, son in the house, elders, deacons, as Paul said, the epistles, bring someone through, cell, multiplying, one-on-one, time in the Word, prophetic, relating to NCMI, the nations, apostolic, translocal, gaining your inheritance* and more. (Do a Facebook group search for 'NCMI-isms' and see the longer list). These are wonderful phrases when you are in the know, but really unhelpful to beginners. If you do use these phrases always explain them.

It's not wrong to use jargon from time to time. Just be ready to explain what it means. Bring it to life. But, when possible, avoid it totally.

8) Affirm and engage the questions that non-Christians commonly ask

It is true that we must never water down the truth in our preaching. But we must preach it in a way that will make it easier for people to accept. Sometimes, in our attempt to not compromise the truth, we really can come across as arrogant. We leave people in a place where they say, 'I just can't accept that.'

Listen to the counsel of Tim Keller in this regard:

'It is hard to overstate how ghetto-ized our preaching is. It is normal to make all kinds of statements that appear persuasive to us but are based upon all sorts of premises that the secular person does not hold. In the preaching, show continual willingness to address the questions that the unbelieving heart will ask. Speak respectfully and sympathetically to people who have difficulty with Christianity. As you write the sermon, imagine a particular skeptical non-Christian (whom you know) in the chair listening to you. Add the asides, the qualifiers, the extra explanations necessary. Listen to everything said in the message with the ears of someone who has doubts or troubles with belief. Regularly address "those of you who aren't sure you believe this, or who aren't sure just what you believe." Give them many asides, even expressing the language of their hearts. Articulate their objections to Christian living and belief better than they can do it themselves. Express sincere sympathy for their difficulties, even when challenging them severely for their selfishness and unbelief. Admonish with tears (literally or figuratively.) Always grant whatever degree of merit their objections have. It is extremely important that the unbeliever feel you understand them. "I've tried it before and it did not work." "I don't see how my life could be the result of the plan of a loving God." "Christianity is a straightjacket." "It can't be wrong if it feels so right." "I could never keep it up." "I don't feel worthy; I am too bad." "I just can't believe."

See www.friends-first.com/toughqs/Thebigsix.aspx for how Tim Keller briefly articulates the most six common objections to faith that Western people have.

However you can also name the objection without solving it. Andy Stanley counsels that simply addressing unchurched people and acknowledging that their questions are real (without even trying to resolve them) will be helpful to them. You don't always have to answer every question or deal with every objection. It is often enough to say something like, 'I can imagine that as we read this verse, some of you say to yourself, 'That's why I'm not sure I want to be a Christian.' I can imagine where you're coming from. Hang in there. Let's keep reading.'

9) Speak about life-issues and aspects of the culture that unchurched people can connect with

Non-Christians will usually listen to a message with this question in their mind, *'Does this person have something to say to me? Something to say to the world I*

live in?’ So we need to preach in such a way that life-issues and aspects of the culture are addressed. This includes things like sport, money, sex, work, family feuds, depression, anger, worry and all the things soap operas, and Oprah and the narrative sections of Scripture so commonly explore.

From time to time, do messages on life-themes. For example, recently, we did a five-week series called ‘Sex in the city’ (found on www.friends-first.com/FREERESOURCES/SexInTheCity.aspx). We were amazed by how many unchurched people came. When I asked one of the Christian people who had invited many unchurched friends why they kept coming back he answered, ‘Well, they just felt like they could learn something about life. And they knew they wouldn’t have to believe everything we said to get something useful out of it. Many of them fear messages that come on too strong and directly about God, but they appreciate messages that come from the side a little - messages about life. And that way they warm to the more hectic message about God.’ From time to time I suggest doing a series of two or three messages about aspects of life.

But even if the whole message is not about a theme, we must learn to keep on referring to issues of life. One of Rick Warren’s guidelines in his own preaching is that he tries to preach something on Sunday that will be helpful to them on Monday.

Speak to the city and culture, not just the people in the room. From time to time don’t only address the people who are in the room, but say, ‘I want to speak to our city now. About a certain aspect of our culture.’ And then mention that aspect (for example, the way we treat each other, or our approach to sexuality, or finances, or sport, etc). And say the things that you admire about our city/culture. And then say the things that you believe God is wanting to address and change. But say these things in such a way that hearers think to themselves, ‘This church is *for* this city, not against this city. When it says something negative about the city it is out of loving, involved concern not unloving, uninvolved judgment.’

Keep touching on common human problems in your preaching: loneliness, desires for significance, love, dreams, hurt, disappointment, resentment, worry, fear of death, fear of crime, self-righteousness, self-rejection, animosity between people and more. Read Genesis or watch Oprah if you have forgotten what these issues are.

10) Be real

Another question often in the mind of an unchurched person who visits is, ‘Who is this person speaking? And why should I trust them? Or listen to them?’ So your message needs to be done in such a way that people think to themselves

things like, 'Wow, this person is normal. They're real. I get a good feeling about them. They really seem to speak from the heart. They really seem to believe what they're saying. They are not just doing their job. And I can relate to them: I also love watching Rugby. And I also love my children.'

And the way to do this is to be highly authentic. To tell some personal stories. Tell stories that are funny, as well as stories that help people to connect with your humanity. When I do this I try to imagine we're sitting around a fire and sharing life stories and it's my turn now.

Especially, tell stories that describe your own failures. Many beginners will be thinking, 'I am not able to do this stuff. These people are so much more morally together than me.' And then they hear that it is not about getting it perfectly right, it's about God's grace. And it's about not giving up no matter how long it takes to get there. Because God is gracious and patient with us, and he helps us.' That can be really attractive to them.

11) Make sure your message is Gospel-centred

2 Timothy 3:16 and 17 makes it clear that the Bible is meant to teach us how to live. And Bible expositors love these verses because it encourages us to draw out the thousands of lessons for life. But we must remember that according to the verse immediately before (verse 15), 'God's Word is able to make us wise for salvation'. This means that, first and foremost, the message of the Bible is the message of the Gospel. Before it tells a person how to live, it tells a person how to be saved.

Today, one of the desperate needs in the church is the *Gospel-centred* exposition of the Scriptures. Not every chapter in the Bible reveals the Gospel-message. So it is possible to preach a message, or even a whole series of messages from the Bible, without showing how these sections of Scripture fit into the larger context of the Bible's message, which is the Gospel. When we fail to bring out the Gospel in our messages from the Bible, we fail to 'make people wise for salvation'. This hurts both non-Christians and Christians in different ways.

Non-Christians, who may just visit once or twice, hear the Bible being preached, but they do not hear what they need to hear to be saved. This is sad! And we're oblivious to the damage we're doing because we justify it by saying, 'But I'm preaching the Bible'. But we're called to do more than just preach parts of the Bible. We need to teach those specific parts *with reference to the whole Gospel message*. We need to preach in such a way that in any sermon, or at least in any series of sermons, there is enough for a hearer to be saved! If we do not preach the Gospel of grace, non-Christian hearers will probably merely hear 'moralism' in our messages. They will wrongly think that

Christianity is merely an attempt to do all the good things the Bible tells us to do. And it will most likely leave them both bored and unsaved. This fails to let them see that the Bible's message is first and foremost a call to receive salvation through faith in Jesus Christ.

But Christians also need to hear the Gospel again and again. A common misconception is that people are saved by believing the Gospel, but then mature through applying biblical principle'. Although this is partially true, the far more emphatic truth of the New Testament is that people are saved through believing the Gospel, but then mature through believing the Gospel more and more deeply. This is why Christians need to keep on hearing the Gospel. Without a fresh revelation of the Gospel of grace, a Christian is dangerously prone to falling into a joyless, legalistic and moralistic faith. How sad that would be. (If you wish to explore this line of thought more deeply see the following article, and be sure to see its subsequent pages too:

www.redeemer2.com/themovement/issues/2004/june/postmodernity_1_p3.html)

Here are some ideas to preach in a Gospel-centred way.

Make sure you say enough for God to save people. A key question to ask yourself is, 'Even if this particular message is not essentially about the Gospel, how can I put enough of the Gospel in the message so that someone can be saved even if they had never heard the Gospel before?'

No matter what section of the Bible you're preaching, learn to present Jesus as the hero. This is Mark Driscoll's main advice. The essence of the Gospel is a revelation of Jesus. Even the Old Testament, which makes no direct mention of Jesus, is full of stuff that directly or indirectly anticipates or foreshadows him. Samuel Rutherford wrote, 'Next to Christ himself I have one great joy: to preach Christ my Lord to others.' Charles Finney wrote, 'Great sermons lead the people to praise the preacher. But great preaching leads the people to praise the Saviour.' Spurgeon wrote, 'A sermon without Christ as its beginning, its middle and its end is a mistake in conception, and a crime in execution.' He also wrote, 'If a person can preach one message without Christ's name being mentioned, it ought to be his last.'

Sometimes proclaim the Gospel in a nutshell, but say it in different ways with reference to the theme of your specific message. The Gospel is gloriously deep and multi-faceted, but we still should be able to briefly mention its major components. As one example, below is the memorised acronym I have often referred to when doing this. Every time I say it, I will give greater attention to some aspects than others, as the Spirit leads me, and as the theme of the message warrants it. I will always try step away from the pulpit in this time.

- **G - God created us** for a relationship with himself.
- **O - Our sins divorced us** from God now and forever. And our sins can't be removed by being moral or religious.
- **S - Sent from heaven, Jesus lived** an amazing life. He did miracles. He taught powerfully. He fulfilled prophecy. He loved the unlovable. He is heaven and earth's true king.
- **P - Paying the price for my sins, Jesus died and rose again.** He died to set us free from the darkness that enslaves us. Now we can have a relationship with God if we want to.
- **E - Everyone who trusts in and bows down to Jesus** as their Lord and Saviour can have their sins forgiven, and start a relationship with God now and forever.
- **L - Learning to follow Jesus** is what the Christian life is all about. What an adventure it is! (Sometimes I then explain *what* Jesus wants to lead us into. I do this by saying, 'Starting a relationship with God by trusting in Jesus is just the beginning. He then wants to lead you and every believer into so much more:
 - **F - a Freedom** from the things that enslave you,
 - **I - an Insight** into the amazing truths in the Bible that deepens your revelation of God and life,
 - **S - Spiritual Community** where you can build real spiritual friendships with all kinds of people,
 - **T - a Trust** that his presence and power is with you, and his promises are for you, and
 - **S - a Special Mission** of partnering with him to bring more and more of his grace, goodness and wisdom into this world.)

Depending on the theme of your message emphasise one or more of the aspects of the Gospel or one or more of the aspects of what it means to follow Jesus. Notice that my acronyms, GOSPEL and FISTS, represent the very foundational truths of Christianity. We must keep repeating them, each time emphasising one or more of the various aspects.

Regularly devote one subpoint in your message to the Gospel. If I have a few points in my message, then often I will make one of those points directly refer to non-Christians. And all or part of that point will be to explain part or all of the Gospel. For example, if I had four subpoints in my message, I will usually say something like, 'I want to suggest four ways we can apply this truth to our lives. In my first point I want to speak to those of who you don't believe in Jesus or are not sure what you believe,'

Never grow tired of thinking about and proclaiming the Gospel. Keep on deepening your own revelation of it. And keep on learning to say it differently related to different themes. It is hard work to develop this ability, but it's worth it. Vance Havner writes, 'We are here to preach sin black, hell hot, judgment certain, eternity long, Christ glorious, the kingdom coming and salvation free.' Charles Spurgeon wrote, 'I wish I could be cut in pieces to preach the Gospel, and that every drop of blood might tell it to my perishing fellow-men.' To deepen your insight into the Gospel is, I recommend you read

two very different angles on the Gospel: 'God is the Gospel' by John Piper and 'Simply Christianity' by NT Wright.

Develop and remember a few one-liners that you can use from time to time that capture key aspects of the Gospel. Here are some of mine:

- *Christianity is not a religion. It's a relationship.*
- *We are more sinful than we ever realised, and more loved than we ever dreamed.*
- *We are on a collision course with a Holy God. Judgment Day is collision day.*
- *It's not good people who get to God and into heaven, it's forgiven people.*
- *The bad things you've done will not disqualify you from God's love. Nor will the good things you've done qualify you for God's love.*
- *Though I don't know everything there is to know about Jesus, I know enough to trust him with my soul, my all, for the rest of my life.*
- *Long before you were deciding what to do with God, he was deciding what to do with you. And amazingly, he decided that instead of making you pay for your sins, he would pay them for you by sending his Son to die for you.*
- *Amazingly, God made it possible for sinners like me and you to have a relationship with a perfectly holy God like himself. And he did it through Jesus Christ.*
- *The one who knows you best loves you most.*
- *Real love is giving someone the very best, though it cost the giver everything, and though the receiver doesn't deserve a thing. (This translates into a three point Gospel explanation:
1) God wants our best and he knows that the very best thing he can give us is a relationship with himself.
2) God paid the ultimate price: he sent Jesus Christ to lay down his life on our behalf.
3) We don't deserve this gift at all since we have so sinned against God our whole lives.)*
- *And there are a million more one-liners that you can add to this list.*

When touching on morality, do so through a Gospel lens. Be careful to not present a purely moralistic angle on any complex moral issue. Show how the Gospel shapes your response to it. For an example of how I did this while speaking on homosexuality (when I knew many gay non-Christians would be present) see www.friends-first.com/toughqs/IsGodhomophobic.aspx. It's also the longest message I ever preached, but the extremely high energy levels in the room made it possible to hold their attention for this long.

12) Let your message be seasoned with grace

Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ, says John 1. This is important to remember, because sometimes we feel deep conviction about the truths in God's Word, and then we say it, but in a way that does not come across as gracious.

I often ask unchurched people who tried out church a few times, but stopped going, what went wrong and this is what I often hear:

- *'It's not what the person said. It's how he said it. He just came across a bit too strong, maybe even a bit arrogant. It was the tone with which he said it.'*
- *'At first I was enjoying the message and thinking, 'This speaks to my life', but then right at the end he started speaking down on other religions with a smirk on his face, and I became concerned and never went back.'*
- *'Every time I go to church the guy says something that really gets stuck up my nose.'*

We must never water down the truth. Nor must we be ashamed of it. But we must find ways of saying it that are helpful to hearers who battle to hear our message. We must speak gently, with humility. We don't have to come across like we've got all the answers. But neither do we need to come across like we're not joyfully convinced.

And very importantly, we must deal with one of the biggest emotional objections to Christianity in people's minds: *they tend to believe that Christianity is basically a commitment to be a moral person.* And they may find morality dangerous (because they associate it with self-righteousness), impossible (because they've tried it and failed), or unappealing (because it looks like a straight-jacket). But the truth is that our message is not, 'Try to be more moral'. Rather it is, 'Receive the grace of God.' They are radically different messages. Every single time we speak we need to make sure that this comes across. People need to hear that God loves them, that God is interested in them, that God wants to accept and forgive them, and help them. He is not impressed by your morality. He takes you as you are. Your goodness does not qualify you. Your badness does not disqualify you. And when you are accepted in Christ, and are sure you are accepted, then and only then can real change begin to happen in our lives.

13) Tap into the power of a short series

A series of three to four weeks is potentially effective in reaching unchurched people in three ways:

- 1) It warrants one or two weeks of advertising beforehand. New Covenant Fellowship in South Africa say that they put half of their energy into advertising a series or event and the other half into actually running it. They also give their church attractive invites to help them invite their friends to the launch of a series.
- 2) It immediately helps people want to come back again next week. Rick Warren says his most evangelistically effective Sunday is Easter. He always

makes it the start of a series, so people are motivated to come back again. It's important to refer to the theme of the following week briefly somewhere in your message. Bait people to come back again.

- 3) Often Christians won't invite their friends to the first one. They will test it out and, once they're convinced that this series will be helpful for their unsaved friends they will start inviting them from week two of the series.

For ideas about how to run a series of three to four weeks scan the list of messages on www.northpoint.org/messages.

14) Think through how you will invite people to come to Christ

Read what Rick Warren says on this point in www.pastors.com/RWMT/?ID=251.

Lex Loizides, of Jubilee Church, Cape Town, suggests the following approach as a tried and tested way to lead people to Christ in a public gathering:

- *Communicate the appeal from God.* At the end of your message address everyone saying: 'God sent Jesus to die for your sins so that they can be forgiven. He rose from the dead so that he could live in your heart, and change your life. If you haven't yet received his forgiveness, and you haven't yet invited him into your life - then why don't you do that now? If you are ready to do that now, then you can do it with a simple prayer, prayed under your breath...'
- *Lead them in a prayer of trust in Christ.* Ask everyone to close their eyes. Lead them in a prayer. 'God, you know everything about me - my hopes, my dreams, my fears and my sins. Jesus you died to forgive my sins, and you rose from the dead to change my life for good. Come do that now. I trust you.' Don't say AMEN because the moment you do everyone will open their eyes.
- *Politely, find out who prayed.* 'If you have prayed that prayer and you meant it, will you put up your hand so I can see?' Now, understand that people don't want to be alone in this, so let them know they're not alone by counting them: 'There are one, two, three of you. Wonderful.'
- *Call them to the front.* If there are two or more people then do this part. 'I want to invite all of you who prayed that prayer, if you don't mind, to come to the front right now for two reasons: 1) As you step out, you're saying, 'I am stepping out into something new - my new life with Christ' 2) There are some people upfront who'd love to pray for you, to give you some literature and to grab your details so that we can help you into the future.'

Let me say two more things about inviting responses...

1) We must be careful of assuming that if a person responds to our Gospel call that they are now saved. Tim Keller reminds us that often a person who responds is merely saying, 'I'm interested.' In other words, they may not have come to the point of salvation, but they certainly are heading that way.

2) We must avoid calling for those kinds of public responses from Christians that will make unchurched people feel embarrassed that they're the only ones who haven't responded. Let me explain. Sometimes preachers like to invite a response from Christian people by saying something like this, 'If you want to re-affirm that then please stand up / raise your hand.' This can be really helpful, *but if you anticipate that your invitation is most likely to get almost everyone to publicly respond, then rather don't invite a public response at all.* This is because non-Christians will feel like they stick out if they don't respond, and they will feel pressured to join in the public response. As a general guideline, only ask Christians to respond publicly if you anticipate a minority of them are likely to respond.

15) Add a testimony (or two) that relates to the theme of the message

A testimony is someone sharing how Christ has positively impacted their lives. When introducing a testimony, don't actually use the word 'testimony' since this is Christian jargon. Rather speak of it as 'a story'.

You can enhance your message with your own stories of the various positive ways that Christ has impacted your life. As a general rule, make sure that somewhere in your message you share the difference Christ has made in your life pertaining to the subject at hand.

But also get others to share their testimony as you speak. This can happen either before, during or at the end of your message. As an example of excellently prepared testimonies explore www.northpoint.org/messages and, if still available, listen to the intro testimonies in the four talks dated 25/11/07 to 16/12/07.

Here are the rules of a good testimony: 1) The right person must be chosen. Find someone whose story of how God made himself real to them connects with the specific message at hand. Keep in mind that if you often use testimonies that there needs to be a variety of personality, age, gender, background etc of people used. 2) Explain to them that a two to three minute testimony is needed that the average non-Christian person will connect with, so do not use religious language and do not get over-emotional in how you say it. 3) Get them to practice it on you and others. Give them feedback about any suggested changes. 4) If possible, video record and edit it adding background music. But live can be just as good.

16) Invite feedback from people, especially those who invited unchurched people

We can always do better than we're now doing with regards to impacting unchurched people when we preach. Here are three practices that will help you improve:

- 1) Test-run your message on one or two people that are quite connected to non-Christians and ask them, 'Let's imagine you're not a Christian - what is helpful and what is unhelpful in getting through to them?'
- 2) After you've preached, invite the feedback of other preachers, asking them the same question.
- 3) After you have preached, ask someone who actually brought along an unchurched person, 'I can imagine that you listened to my whole message through the ears of the person you brought. What was helpful, and what can I do better next time?' Recently I preached a message on Christ as king. Afterwards, I asked a man who had brought his first-time-to-church friend what was helpful and unhelpful for where his friend was at. He wrote a one-page email to me that included brilliant suggestions of how I could have been more helpful. Here's a sample paragraph from his email...

The king-imagery was pretty strong. I think when using king/authority imagery and language around non-Christians you really have to draw attention to and hammer home the difference between the examples of authority we see and the all-knowing, all-loving, ego-free authority that God exercises. It's got to be on another level from declaring allegiance to anyone/anything else, otherwise it feels like we're trying to drum up support for a political hopeful, which comes with that gut-feel we all get from having lived in the world for a while - leaders always abuse their power.

I can honestly say that next time my preaching will be better because of the feed-back he gave me. As difficult as it is to receive negative feedback, I strongly recommend this practice because it is the only way to get better in the future.

17) Love the people you are speaking to

Proverbs says that love covers over a multitude of wrong-doing. In a sense we can get so much wrong in the way we communicate to unchurched people, but if they sense that we love them, and that we are motivated by love as we speak, then that will compensate for our failures more than anything else.

Sometimes in our preparation we can be so focused on our material, and on trying to outwit and persuade non-Christians that we can miss the most basic thing: we're meant to love people more than merely try to persuade them. After all, people don't care how much we know until they know how much we care.

That is why in our prayer-preparation we need to ask God to fill our hearts with love for the people we're speaking to. A fascinating thing happens when we're truly love-motivated: we are no longer fearful of the people we speak to. This is because 'perfect love drives out all fear.' Being fearful of the people we're trying to impact is the single greatest obstacle to actually impacting them. Let's learn to see preaching as an avenue of love.

(For Tim Keller's list of tips on this theme go to:

www.friends-first.com/content/uploads/sunday%20talks/KellerUnchurchedPreach.pdf.)

Conclusion

In our Sunday gatherings, we need to preach *every time* in ways that will not only benefit our Christian audience, but will reach and impact unchurched people too. I believe this is a non-negotiable if we long to be a church that grows not merely through transfer growth, but through conversion growth.

And we need to be highly thoughtful about how to do just that. I list seventeen ways that we can adjust our preaching to be more evangelistically potent. And I don't believe that any of these adjustments need to dilute the discipleship impact our preaching is meant to make on our congregations.

Be aware however that if you change your current preaching approach (which most likely has not strongly factored in the presence of non-Christians) your preaching may well get worse before it will be better. But don't give up. Instead be inspired by the example of Tiger Woods who was determined to improve his already-amazing game. He became convinced that the swing he'd developed over the decades was faulty. So he courageously started working on a new swing in 2000, and, as a result, for the next year played bad golf. But eventually he got his new swing right, and began to play better golf than ever before.

It's important that everyone on the preaching team develops this approach, including those who feel like they have no evangelism gifting. We need to make sure that our people know that *every single Sunday is going to be a good Sunday to invite an unsaved person along*. If we fail to apply some of the main tips in this article they will lose their confidence in the suitability of Sunday gatherings as a place to consistently invite their unsaved friends and family to. That, in my opinion, would be as tragic as letting the one sheep 'just get lost.'