

Acts: Turning The World Upside Down

Clarifying the Gospel

Introduction

I would like to offer two somewhat different ways to present the gospel to someone else. Though we may be tempted to choose one or the other based on which one “grabs” us the most, we should rather choose one or the other on based on the needs of the person we are addressing.

A spiritual divide

The basic difference between people I meet today has to do with why they may think that they need the gospel. People from traditional cultures and mindsets tend to a) have a belief in God, and b) have a strong sense of moral absolutes and the obligation to be “good”. These people respond well to a presentation that says, “Sin keeps you from ever being as good as you need to be, and it therefore separates you from God.”

People with more secular and “post-modern” mindsets tend to a) have only a vague belief in the divine if at all and, b) have little sense of moral absolutes. Therefore, they feel the obligation to be free and true to their own selves and dreams. These people respond well to a presentation that says, “Sin keeps you from being free as you need to be, and therefore it enslaves and de-humanizes you.”

Let me summarize the difference in another way:

The way to show the traditional persons their need for the gospel is by saying, “your sin makes you imperfect! You can’t be righteous enough.” (Imperfection is the duty-worshipper’s horror. So you are threatening them.) But the way to show more deeply secularized persons their need for the gospel, you say, “your sin makes you a slave! You are actually being religious, though you don't know it — trying to be righteous in a destructive way”. (Slavery is the choice — worshipper’s horror. So you are threatening them.) Both approaches are true, Biblically, of course. But each assumes a piece of common grace, a certain insight about truth. The older cultures saw duty as the key of

salvation. The gospel says: “but you AREN’T living up to your duty unless you come to God through the finished work of X.” The newer culture sees freedom as the key of salvation. The gospel says: “but you AREN’T free unless you come to God through finished work of X.” Now in both situations, we must be careful. The gospel is *not* a new way to fulfill duty — it is a whole new kind of life. And the gospel is not a new way to find happiness — it is a whole new kind of life. In former times, when churches were so filled with people who were traditional, we had to avoid preaching any “salvation through duty”. Now churches are so filled with people who are therapized to seek fulfillment, we must avoid preaching any “salvation through discovery”.

Who are the two kinds of people?

Every person must be considered on a case by case basis. But here are some ideas.

The first set of people tend to include: people who are older, who are from strong Catholic or religious Jewish backgrounds, who are from conservative evangelical/Pentecostal Protestant backgrounds, people from the southern U.S., and first generation immigrants from non-European countries. The second set of people tend to include: people who are younger, who are from nominal/weak Catholic or non-religious Jewish backgrounds, who are from liberal mainline Protestant backgrounds, people from the western and northeastern U.S., and Europeans.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1. Which clarification of the gospel connects most with you?**
- 2. Discuss different people you are desiring to see come to Christ and let the group decide which approach might be most productive. Share a short description and background of the person to give the group a mental picture of this particular person.**