

Do you want some stinky tofu? (**Picture**) Most of us don't know what stinky tofu is...it's a delicacy in Taiwan. Every region has certain cultural cues. In 2011 when the Packers were playing the Steelers in the Super Bowl in Texas, a Milwaukee news outlet decided to have fun by asking Texans to pronounce some names of Wisconsin cities (**play video**).

Clear communication is important. When it comes to the Gospel, it's critical. Sometimes we're barriers to the Gospel. Some Christians are just odd. **Do you have to be weird to be a witness?**

If we truly follow and obey Jesus, we'll strike the world as being weird, possibly even a bit unstable. After all, what "normal" person seeks to fight against sexual lust? What "normal" person wants to give away a significant portion of their income? What "normal" person forgives their enemies and does good to those who mistreat them? What "normal" person stakes all their hope on a dying and rising Messiah? Following Jesus means saying "no" to many of the things the world loves and considers normal.

On top of the inherent worldly weirdness of Christianity, the Gospel is inherently offensive. To those who don't know God, the message of the Gospel is foolish. It's a stumbling block to Jews, insanity to Muslims, stupidity to atheists and wacko to pagans. Because following Jesus is "weird" and the message of the Gospel is "folly," we must be careful that we don't add stumbling blocks to the message of the Gospel. We must take great pains to ensure that the only thing unbelievers stumble over is the Gospel, that the only offense is the offense of Christ Himself. If an unbeliever associates one of my preferences with the message of Jesus, I've created additional stumbling blocks to the Gospel.

Tim Keller (**picture**) planted a church in New York City. He understands communicating the Gospel in another culture. He writes, *"If some aspect of a new culture does not compromise the Gospel itself and makes you more accessible to others, there is no reason not to adapt to that element out of courtesy and love – even if it is not your preference. Otherwise, the Gospel may, because of you, appear 'unnecessarily alien.' We must avoid turning off listeners because we are culturally offensive rather than the Gospel."*

What does this mean practically? It means we must make sure that we never turn the Gospel into "Jesus + my preference." For example, is homeschooling a viable education option? Sure. But it's not the Gospel. Is it smart to think through different vaccination options? Yes, but vaccination isn't the Gospel. Is organic living a healthy lifestyle option? Yeah, but it's not the Gospel. Do Republicans and Democrats have some valuable ideas? Yep, but that's not the Gospel. You get the point.

We must be careful to distinguish between our preferences and the Gospel. We don't want to turn someone off to the Gospel because they don't homeschool, eat a certain way, or hold to a particular set of non-Biblical political ideas. Unbelievers will stumble over Jesus and the message of the Gospel. We don't want to add additional stumbling blocks. Have you added any stumbling blocks to the Gospel?

This morning we want to talk about how to share our faith in Christ in a culture that has dramatically changed. Jesus was incarnational. He came to earth and took on human flesh to reach us. Paul believed in incarnational evangelism, 1 Corinthians 9:19-23 (p. 957). Jesus sacrificed for us and we must sacrifice ourselves and our culture to reach our world for Christ.

Today is going to be a bit different from the normal message. It's going to be more like a workshop in sharing our faith. Instead of looking in depth at a passage of Scripture, we want to instead look at how the Apostle Paul shared the message of Jesus with others, how he adapted to the culture.

Essentially, I want to do two things. First, I want to share some observations about how our culture has changed and then conclude with **five principles** about how to share our faith in Jesus in today's world.

1. How has the cultural context changed? Many Christians fail to have an impact because we don't understand how our culture has radically changed. Most contemporary thinkers believe we're living through a transition from *modernism* to *postmodernism* (**chart**).

Pre-modernism is that time from when the New Testament was written until the 1500s. People were mostly illiterate. Truth was based on relationships of authority. In pre-modernism you didn't question authority. Those in authority knew more than you and were more educated than you. Pre-modernism was a time of kings and bishops. It was all about power.

Modernism grew out of the 1500s. It believed reason was the answer to everything. The events leading to the birth of modernism in the 16th century were the invention of the printing press, the rise of science, the Reformation and Renaissance. Modernism believed human evils would be solved through reason and technology. It was book focused. Literacy rates began rising and the primary way to communicate was the written page.

The rise of **Postmodernism** or postmodernity is harder to date. Most think it started in the 1980s. Postmodernism is no longer confident that reason and technology will solve all our problems. Technology has created as many problems as it has solved. Postmodernism is suspicious that everyone has a hidden agenda, that there are no people who are entirely neutral.

In postmodernism digital technology and the Internet are the primary modes of communication. Characteristics of postmodernism are cultural pluralism, an emphasis on tolerance, a belief that there's no such thing as absolute truth, and a focus on individual freedom and liberty.

Our culture is transitioning from modernism to postmodernism. More people are embracing postmodern assumptions, particularly Millennials. It has enormous implications for how we share Christ. Not understanding these changes is what makes us look like kooks when we talk about Jesus.

a) In modernism outreach was about conquest but in postmodernism it's about service. In modernism outreach was having a Bible in one hand and a sword in another hand. It was believed that ultimately Christians would "Christianize" the world. Christopher Columbus was a typical modern Christian, as he came believing he was on a mission from God to spread the Christian faith. Yet he also freely used violence and power to spread his message. In modernism it was hard to separate the message of Jesus from western culture, because the two had become so mixed together. Christians talk about "taking their cities for God" and "winning souls to Christ." The language modernist Christians used to speak of outreach was the language of conquest.

This conquest approach to outreach terrifies many non-Christians. Let me share a letter to the editor from one major newspaper: "*These [Christians] scare...me. I believe firmly...they represent the most dangerous threat to my liberty that exists today...I very much fear that, given the power, these people would take away my right to disagree.*" More and more view Christians the way that person does. When we use conquest terminology, we contribute to this.

Outreach today must be service oriented. This service mentality was demonstrated by Mother Teresa. As she spoke at the Presidential Prayer Breakfast a few years ago, Mother Teresa spoke about abortion. She said, "If you don't want your baby, don't abort it. Give it to me. I'll raise it." No one questioned whether she was serious or not. She'd devoted her life to service. Her life of service gave her credibility to say that.

b) In modernism outreach was program based, today it's relationship based. Most of what the Church has done in regard to outreach goes back to a preacher and Christian leader named Charles Finney (**picture**) who lived in the mid-1800s. He was a lawyer who became a Christian. He viewed effective outreach as finding the right methodology. He popularized the altar call, the idea of calling people forward in church to receive Christ. He believed if you had an outreach event and no one came to know Christ, it was because you didn't use the right methodology. He was a pragmatist and is where we get a lot of our ideas about evangelism.

A programmatic approach worked fairly well when most people were nominal Christians. They knew about Jesus, knew the Bible, believed in God and so forth but simply didn't trust themselves to Jesus. Today if we see outreach as a program or method, we're seen as pushy salespeople.

On Amazon (**picture**) readers can post reviews of books. One of the older books on evangelism had this online review: "*This book is not only great for telling people about Jesus, but it's done wonders for my Amway business. By using the methods and techniques in this book, my Amway sales have gone through the roof.*" Evangelism becomes salesmanship.

Today effective outreach must be relationship based rather than program based. Many are suspicious of big programs and rightfully so if we're using the same techniques in evangelism that work for selling Amway. Postmoderns have a "hidden agenda" detector. They've been over-marketed for so long by so many commercials and evangelism programs can sound like just another commercial to them.

c) In modernism outreach was an event, today it's much more of a process. Outreach used to be about reaching nominal Christians, those who understood the Bible, believed in God, accepted the Ten Commandments, and so on. Essentially churches were reaching people who were already religious but hadn't yet trusted in Christ.

We're not against outreach events, but unchurched people today are coming into our churches wanting to see what the Christian faith is all about. They don't want to see a show; they want to see what a genuine Christian community looks like. Today's unchurched person is so thoroughly secularized, reaching them is entirely different than reaching nominal Christians who accept the truthfulness of the Christian message.

Before today's secularized person decides to become a follower of Jesus, there's a lot of ground to cover, lots of issues and questions to address. Most of the people who come to know Jesus here at Grace don't make a commitment to Jesus until 6 to 18 months after they start attending. They begin attending as a seeker and that process from seeker to surrender to Jesus is different for everyone. Viewing outreach as a process is very different than how most of us have been taught to view it.

d) In modernism outreach tried to prove that the message was true but in postmodernism we have to demonstrate that the message is relevant. Modernism so exalted reason that Christians had to demonstrate that believing in Jesus was

not irrational. To do this Christians become focused on things like evidence, facts, arguments, and apologetics. The Christian faith is a reasonable faith, not some irrational leap in the dark and that approach works great with people with modernist assumptions.

Those with a postmodern worldview aren't asking whether the Christian faith is true. Postmoderns are suspicious of people who think they have all the facts. They know theories change and sometimes people with facts have a hidden agenda that skews the way they present the facts.

Postmoderns ask whether the Christian faith *works*, not whether it's *true*. Postmoderns in general don't want to know truth about God, but they want to know and experience God Himself. If we share our sixteen impressive reasons why the resurrection of Jesus really happened, lots of postmoderns say, "So what. What does that mean to me and my life today?" We've first got to show that the message of Jesus is relevant, and then we show the reason why it's relevant is because it's true.

Our culture has changed drastically. Often it's not the Christian message that's offensive, it's our approach. Chuck Smith ([picture](#)) says, "*Christians need to find new ways to present the Gospel.*"

2. How Can We Share Our Faith? What can we learn from the Apostle Paul on how to share our faith without being obnoxious? Let's let Paul mentor us in evangelism. Paul was no stranger to changing cultures, yet he was able to effectively share the message of Jesus in the midst of transition.

Principle #1: Care about seekers. Turn to Romans 9:1-3 (p. 801). Notice how much Paul cares about his lost countrymen here. There's no doubt that he loves them. He's torn up about their condition. He'd be willing to somehow sacrifice his own salvation to bring them to faith in Jesus Christ.

Too many of us don't care that much about non-Christians. One pastor noted that we've worked hard to make seeker sensitive churches but have failed to make seeker sensitive Christians. It's virtually possible to effectively share the Lord with a person we don't really like or care about.

Think of the message of Jesus as being like a song. Our caring is the music, and the lyrics are the good news about Jesus. They've got to hear the music before they can understand the words.

This isn't caring about a person conditionally, as if it were a manipulation technique to get someone to believe in Jesus. Some cult groups practice something called "love bombing." Potential members are drowned in a sea of love and caring, but it's all conditional upon their conversion and involvement in the group. Many Christians come across like this.

Love must be genuine, without hypocrisy or a hidden agenda. My unchurched friends know that I'd love nothing more than for them to come into a life changing relationship with Christ, but they also know that my friendship is not conditional on that. Our love for them must be without strings. The fact that they swear or get drunk or sleep around or believe in abortion or gay rights is not their core problem. Their core problem is that they don't know Jesus. You can be a boy scout and go to Hell. Like Jesus we must love the sinner though hating the sin.

Principle #2: Pray for seekers. Look at Romans 10:1 (p. 802). Paul spent time praying for his countrymen who didn't have a relationship with Jesus Christ. He wasn't just praying for them as a faceless, nameless mass, but he prayed for actual people, family members, friends, former colleagues and others he knew who didn't know Jesus.

If you're having trouble caring for a person, pray for that person every day until you start caring. Ask God to bless that person, to fill his or her life with God's presence and greatness. Pray for God's will to be done, for that person to be enriched with friends and family.

Some Christians find it helpful to do prayer walks in their neighborhoods. Just a casual walk around the block but as you walk silently praying for the people you see, for that nosy neighbor across the street, for the family with the out of control teenager two houses down and so forth. It's hard to share the love of Christ with people we haven't prayed for.

Principle #3: Affirm what is positive in their lives. Isn't that what Paul's doing in Romans 10:2? "*For I can testify about them that they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge.*" He could have said, "My Jewish countrymen are totally wrong. They're so focused on do's and don'ts that they're blind to God's grace." Instead he affirms something in their lives that they have right, namely their zeal for God. It's a zeal not based on knowledge, but it's a real zeal nonetheless.

Maybe you're thinking, "But Scott, you don't know my unchurched friends!" Paul was talking about religious people here, people who already believed in God, accepted the Ten Commandments, and so forth. Of course he could find something to affirm in their lives, but I can't find anything positive to affirm in my unchurched friends. Yet, Paul did the exact same thing when he spoke to the irreligious Athenians on Mars Hill in Acts 17.

He says he can see they're very religious and observes that they've even built an altar to an unknown god. But he doesn't say, "You stupid idiots, how can you worship idols made of wood and clay." But instead says, "What you worship as something unknown, that's what I'm proclaiming to you when I tell you about Jesus Christ."

Too often Christians are reluctant to affirm positive things in other people's lives because they're afraid it will be misunderstood as an endorsement of their whole lifestyle. So if I affirm my non-Christian friend's honesty at work, it will make him think that I approve of the fact that he's living with his girlfriend and has a child out of wedlock.

Paul didn't have that hang-up. He freely affirmed what he saw that was positive in their lives. If Paul could find things to affirm in the pagan Athenians, you can I can find things in the lives of our unchurched friends.

Principle #4: Share your faith by speaking the message, Rom. 10:14-15. There are two important words in these verses. The first word is *preaching* in v. 14. We tend to think of preaching as something negative, as a kind of scolding or nagging. Remember the lyrics to Madonna's (**picture**) song from years ago, *Papa Don't Preach*. But the Greek word is not a negative, nagging, scolding word. To preach is simply to announce something publicly. What Paul is talking about is different than what most think of as preaching in our culture. Preaching is simply publicly speaking a message.

The other word is *sent* in verse 15. The word is *apostello* and the same word from which we get the word "apostle." It means to send a person as an official representative of someone else, like an ambassador of a president goes to represent that president to a foreign nation. Not just anyone can preach this message, it must be someone who's sent by Jesus. That someone is the Christian community, it you and me, the Church. Jesus said to us, "*As the Father sent me, so now I send you*" (John 20:21). We're the ones who are sent, authorized with the message.

The message is what Scripture calls the Gospel or good news about Jesus. It centers on God sending Jesus to the world, His perfect life, sacrificial death on the Cross and resurrection from the dead. The message centers on the fact that Christ died for us so we can be made right with God and come into God's kingdom. That's the Gospel. Now I find from this section **two important things** to keep in mind when we speak the message about Jesus.

We must tell it accurately. This word *sent* tells us that it's not our message that we share, it's Jesus' message. We don't have the liberty to water down the message or to leave out parts of it people might find difficult to accept or understand. We've got to make sure we're accurately sharing the good news.

We must tell it positively. The last part of verse 15 is a quotation from Isaiah 52:7 about a messenger's feet being beautiful. They didn't have TV or the Internet. News was communicated by messengers. These messengers would come to a community with news about what was going on in other places. You could tell just by looking at the messenger whether it was good news or bad. A messenger with a spring in his step and smile on his face was bringing good news. The "beautiful feet" is simply a way of saying a messenger with good news is a sight for sore eyes.

How many unchurched people look at their Christian friends as a sight for sore eyes? Or do they dodge us because we have a reputation for being negative, critical or obnoxious? When that happens, they're not offended by Jesus, they're offended by us... One more principle.

Principle #5: We share our faith by trusting in the power of the message. Look at verse 17. Faith isn't generated by using the right technique. Faith is generated by the message itself, the good news of Jesus Christ. Romans 1:17 "*For in the Gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: 'The righteous will live by faith.'*"

The good news of Jesus Christ is the power of God in action to bring about salvation for everyone who believes. Many Christians don't really believe the message is powerful. We think we have to prop the message up with special programs or slick sales techniques. We focus so much on methodology, we neglect what truly transforms lives. If we believe in the power of the Gospel, we won't rely on techniques. Because if we can just accurately communicate the good news, that itself will generate faith.

Conclusion: The Church in America is ministering in a very different culture than what existed just fifty years ago. If we want to reach our world, we must follow Paul's example of caring, praying, affirming, speaking, and trusting. Let me close with this true story.

Amy Tracy (**picture**) was raised in a dysfunctional home that focused on performance. She bloomed in high school as a cross country runner. Her dad was a typical sports obsessed father, who constantly prodded her to perform. When she stopped winning races, her family grew disappointed with her and she began to grow depressed. In college Amy got into drugs and alcohol. In her junior year she developed a kinship with several professors who she knew were gay. She was drawn to their sense of community and ultimately Amy concluded that she was gay.

Soon afterward, Amy committed her life to women's rights and became actively involved in the pro-abortion movement. Yet there were times Amy was filled with a profound sense of emptiness and sadness, a longing for peace and joy that she didn't find in the way she was living her lives. As she looked at the Christians who marched against her in abortion demonstrations, all she saw was anger, vitriol and hatred.

In Amy's words, "Christians lived down to my low expectations." Yet Amy started feeling like she was falling apart and she concluded that her emptiness was a hunger for God himself. By now Amy had become the press secretary for NOW, the National Organization for Women. One night in Washington, D.C. Amy ran into a pro-life activist that she'd

seen at several abortion demonstrations. She made a sarcastic remark, expecting him to respond the same way. But instead, he said, "Amy, all I pray for is the chance to see you standing in church, praising and loving Jesus. Forget the abortion debate. That's all I really want."

Amy's hunger for God grew desperate and finally she looked in the yellow pages for a Christian church. One Sunday she showed up, her pick-up truck covered with rainbow flags and pro-abortion stickers. Amy wondered if she'd be thrown out, yet as the pastor spoke and the church worshiped, she sensed God calling to her. It took a while, but eventually Amy committed her life to Jesus Christ.

Today Amy Tracy is a writer for *Focus on the Family* in the area of public policy. And this is what she says: "My prayer is that Christians will be able to see others with compassion, not as enemies; as broken and in need of restoration by the only healing of our souls, Jesus Christ."

God has called us to reach this world but we must be incarnational just like Jesus. We must speak their language and care for them, love them, pray for them and share the message of hope our world needs – the Gospel. By God's grace working in our lives, let's reach our world for His glory!