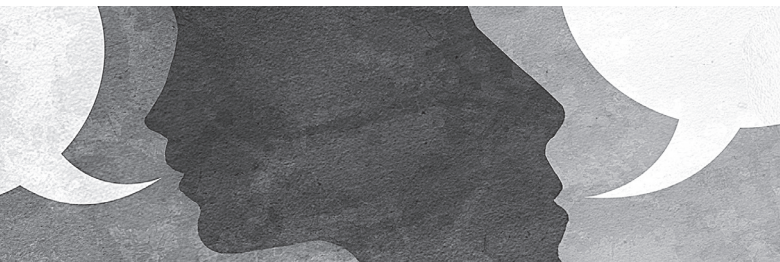


GOSPEL CONVERSATIONS

CONNECTING PEOPLE
WITH THE STORY OF JESUS



Ajith Fernando



introduction

Gospel Conversations

Connecting People
with the Story of Jesus

Within three houses of the home where I grew up in Colombo, Sri Lanka, lived a Buddhist family, a Hindu family, a Sunni Muslim family, a Shiite Muslim family, and a person with New Age beliefs. All of them were our friends.

As a child, I would go to the Buddhist temple in our neighborhood and chat with the monks there. In my late teens and early twenties, I met almost every Saturday night with six other people—five

were Muslim, another was an atheist. We spent hours talking about various issues, including religion and philosophy.

The pages that follow, I share with you what I've learned as I have attempted to relate to people of other faiths from within a multifaith context. My hope is that this booklet will help you to understand and relate more wisely and lovingly with those of other faiths.

Ajith Fernando

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one

The Messenger

On the banks of the Ganges River, Indian evangelist Sadhu Sundar Singh stood proclaiming the gospel. Speaking to the crowd with great conviction, he enraptured some with his message while enraging others. As he continued to preach the good news of Jesus Christ, someone in the crowd scooped up a handful of sand and flung it into Sundar Singh's face. The sand in his mouth, nose, and eyes forced him to stop preaching. He walked to the river to wash it out. Several men, appalled by this

despicable action, surrounded the culprit, took him into custody, and handed him over to the police.

Rinsing the sand from his face, Sundar Singh turned to the scene behind him: a man in police custody and an angry mob calling for him to be taken away and punished. Walking through the crowd and standing in front of the police officer, Sundar Singh did the unexpected—something that carried as much meaning as the words that had been cut short by the sand. Rather than demand justice, he asked for mercy. Filled with a compassion that revealed the truth of his preaching, he begged for the perpetrator's release.

The man's eyes widened in disbelief as Sundar Singh continued his plea, even refusing to preach until the suspect was released. As the police restraints dropped from his wrists, the man dropped to his knees at Sundar Singh's feet. He begged forgiveness and declared his desire to hear more about the Jesus who was being preached.

An incident from my own experience reinforces the need for humble interaction with those who might oppose us. Some years ago our ministry decided to begin working in areas not previously exposed to the gospel. After a time, our staff and the new believers in one of the villages endured

harassment at the hands of followers of another religion, and on one occasion the staff workers were badly beaten. When I visited the village, I was persuaded to contact those responsible for the attack to attempt an explanation of what we were doing. After some convincing, they agreed to meet with me.

Unfamiliar with the beliefs and traditions of the people I was about to visit, I asked those in our ministry who had come to Christ from that faith to tutor me on their customs and practices and how I should address them. From their suggestions, I developed a plan. It was important to ensure both that my convictions were uncompromised and that I was not unnecessarily offensive.

I agreed to meet with them at their place of worship. As I entered, I removed my shoes at the gate, according to their practice. I sat on the floor while their leader, who was younger than I, sat on a chair—a custom that expresses respect for the



Our belief in the truth of the gospel does not mean that we should deny people of other faiths basic respect or the freedom to worship or share their faith.

leader. I was simply following the customs of the people and the etiquette of the village.

Some in our group felt that I had compromised my faith by showing this type of respect, but I believed it was essential that I respect their traditions, especially when those practices did not contradict my beliefs.



In today's pluralistic societies, the likelihood of interacting with someone whose belief system is very different from our own is increasingly likely. Therefore, followers of Christ should have guiding principles about how we interact with others, whether or not they share our beliefs. We must also have convictions about how to respond to their beliefs. In both the East and the West, the prevailing attitude of religious pluralism presents a challenge to those who would maintain traditional Christian beliefs.

The difficulties of interaction with those of other faiths are significant for Christians who are a minority in their nations. But those who live in places where Christianity is the religion of the majority are not exempt from these concerns. Our belief in the truth of the gospel does not mean that we should

deny people of other faiths basic respect or the freedom to worship or share their faith.

Sometimes when I hear some Christians speak, I must confess they sound like fundamentalists in other faiths, suggesting that only Christian practices be allowed. But we need not be so afraid of other faiths that we restrict their freedom of worship. It was in a multifaith context that the early church grew and flourished. This could happen today too. Christians should defend the rights of those of other faiths, extending the grace and courtesy we would desire should we find ourselves in their situation (CF. MATTHEW 7:12).

Humble Servanthood

The need for followers of Christ to live as servants is as great now as it was when Christ told His followers that He expected just that (CF. MATTHEW 20:25–28). If people see us as servants, not just of those who share our beliefs but of everyone, they may be challenged to think carefully about the gospel.

Australian missionary Graham Staines and his two sons were murdered in 1999 when a mob of religious militants set fire to the vehicle in which they were sleeping. Most devotees of that religion were greatly troubled by these murders and decried

them. The outrage at the act was surely heightened by the fact that the Staines worked among those with leprosy, a group that was mostly avoided and neglected. But people witnessed an amazing expression of Christlike forgiveness by Mrs. Staines. In her affidavit for the commission on the death of her husband and two sons, she said:

The Lord God is always with me to guide me and help me to try to accomplish the work of Graham. . . . It is far from my mind to punish the persons who were responsible for the death of my husband, Graham, and my two children. But it is my desire and hope that they would repent and would be reformed.

The Bible is clear that those who proclaim the lordship of Jesus are servants of the people to whom they proclaim this message. Paul told the Corinthians, “What we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake” (2 CORINTHIANS 4:5). He also said, “Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible” (1 CORINTHIANS 9:19). Our model is Jesus, who “made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant” (PHILIPPIANS 2:7).

What if large numbers of Christians adopted a lifestyle of loving servanthood? Would we be laughed at or exploited? Perhaps. But some would take note of the power and deep conviction of our testimony, and the door might be opened to accepting the message of a unique Christ.

When in Athens, Do as the Athenians Do

When Paul acted in ways appropriate to the people he was among, he demonstrated cultural sensitivity.



The Bible is clear that those who proclaim the lordship of Jesus are servants of the people to whom they proclaim this message.

He “reasoned in the synagogue with both Jews and God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there” (ACTS 17:17). The Jews and God-fearing Greeks were people who were already interested in the religion of the Bible, the Old Testament. Paul went to their place of worship and religious instruction, the synagogue. But he also went to the places where people “happened to be,” and mingled with them to share the gospel.

The Athenian marketplace¹ was the economic, political, and cultural heart of the city. An ancient account of Socrates reads, “He was to be seen in the marketplace when it was most crowded.” There the great philosopher would enter into conversation with those he met.¹ When Paul evangelized the city of Socrates (Athens), he used the method of Socrates—walking through the marketplace and conversing with the people. His message was different, but his method was similar.

➤ *The marketplace was called the **agora**, the main public place in the city, populated with public buildings and colonnades.*

But Paul didn’t always use the style he employed in Athens. When he came to Athens, he adapted to fit the Athenian culture. This is called contextualization. Contextualization takes place when the presentation and outworking of the gospel are done in a way that fits the context, whether it’s Athens, New York City, Mexico City, or a remote village in Uganda.

But context refers to more than geographical location. It also refers to cultural factors such as

1 Cited in R. J. Knowling, “The Acts of the Apostles,” *The Expositor’s Greek Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1974 reprint), 365.

language, customs, and values. Culture can differ from one side of the city to the other and even from one door to the next. A Christian may find that her culture is very different from her neighbor's, even though they live in the same town and speak the same language.

Contextualization becomes necessary whenever we interact with a person from a different culture. It is needed when a Chinese missionary travels to Brazil or to Peru. It is needed when an American shares the gospel with a German. But it's also needed when a person from an inner-city neighborhood tries to witness to someone from an affluent city suburb. It is needed when a highly educated urban Indian tries to witness to a rural Indian who has little formal education, or when a Christian mother tries to witness to the mother of her daughter's classmate who follows a different faith system.

Paul was determined to present the gospel in ways that



The core of the gospel transcends culture. And even if some of the gospel's features clash with the culture, the message must not be compromised.

were relevant and would impact those to whom he ministered. He told how he became like a Jew, as one under the law, when working with Jewish people. Yet he also became as one not having the law when he worked with a secular or pagan audience. He became “all things to all people,” and said, “To the weak I became weak, to win the weak” (1 CORINTHIANS 9:22). This statement vividly shows the challenge before us. Paul adapted his approach and methods to match the habits and styles of those to whom he was ministering. This may mean learning new practices and habits or quitting practices we have had for some time.▀ Paul reminds us of our motivation. All this is done “to win as many as possible” with the gospel of Jesus.

▀ **Contextualization** will often involve evaluation of our practices and the practices of others to determine whether or not they are necessary for or contradict the message of Christ.

Contextualization, however, must be distinguished from syncretism. Syncretism takes place when elements essential to the gospel are dropped, or elements incompatible with the gospel are taken on in the practice and presentation of Christianity. It takes place when a Christian, trying to maintain his friendship with a non-Christian, refuses to insist that following Christ is the only way to salvation.

The core of the gospel transcends culture. And even if some of the gospel's features clash with the culture, the message must not be compromised. Paul's speech in Athens clashed with the thinking of the Athenians. He was a contextualizer, but he refused to be a syncretist. When he communicated the gospel in Athens, he used the communication style of the Athenians even though his content clashed with their beliefs.

We see Paul's style of contextualization clearly as we look at his speech in Athens (ACTS 17:22–31). Here, as in Lystra (14:15–17), he did not make any direct quotations from the Old Testament. This was very different from his speeches to Jewish audiences. The Jews accepted the authority of the Scriptures, so Paul quoted them (17:1–14). The Athenians did not accept this authority, so he didn't use it as the basis for his argument.

Interestingly, Paul quotes from writers the Athenians looked up to. Of the two statements in Acts 17:28, there is a question about whether the first is actually a quotation, “for in him we live and move and have our being.” But the second certainly is²: “we are his offspring.” Certainly Paul

2 From the fourth-century BC writer Aratus of Soli in Cicilia. Cited in *Hellenistic Commentary to the New Testament*, M. Eugene Boring and others, editors (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 328.

would not have agreed with the philosophical system out of which the statement arose—the words referred to one of the Greek gods—but he could agree with this individual statement and use it to buttress his argument. Yet his message was what it had always been—the centrality of Jesus as proved by the resurrection and the need to repent and make Christ Lord.

Paul's message in Athens was thoroughly scriptural. F. F. Bruce says, "His argument is firmly based on biblical

revelation; it echoes throughout the thought, and at times the very language, of the Old Testament."³

John Wesley called this speech "a divinely philosophical discourse."⁴ While Paul's language and ideas were scriptural, the form of his Athenian address was most appropriate for his philosophically oriented



***We must discover
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In different
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³ F. F. Bruce, "The Book of Acts," *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988), 335.

⁴ John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament* (London: The Epworth Press, 1966), 464.

audience. He commented on their religious practices, quoted from their own philosophers, and used their own logical style of argumentation in his attempt to persuade them to make Christ their Lord.

There are important lessons here for anyone trying to present Christ. We must discover the methods our audience uses to pursue truth. In different cultures, different methods become important. For example, many churches are using drama and music to attract people and to communicate the gospel effectively.

Some may question the use of certain methods to present the gospel on the grounds that they have also been used to present a decidedly non-Christian message. True, the methods we use may also be used in ways that dishonor God. But that does not disqualify the method. The method is not evil. Christians in Africa and Asia have used the drum effectively in Christian worship and expression even though animists have been using it for demonic rituals for centuries. There is nothing wrong with the method or in this case the instrument; it is the way that it is used that makes it objectionable.■

♪ *Scripture is full of examples of **music and dance** being used to praise the Lord. David danced before the Lord in celebration of the return of the ark of the covenant (2 SAMUEL 6:13–15).*

The gospel does indeed transcend cultures, and followers of Christ may contextualize the gospel for their hearers. We have the freedom—and perhaps the responsibility—to creatively communicate the gospel in ways that are relevant and understandable to our hearers.



two

The Message

Scratch Where It Itches

In the book of Acts, Paul models contextualization to a Gentile audience (SEE ACTS 17). His discussions in Athens attracted sufficient attention to gain him an invitation to address the Areopagus (ACTS 17:19). This distinguished body “was a council that had oversight of the educational, moral, and religious welfare of the community.”⁵

⁵ Everett F. Harrison, *Interpreting Acts: The Expanding Church* (Zondervan Publishing House, 1986), 284.

The delegates asked him, “May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we would like to know what they mean” (17:19–20). Paul’s response to the Athenians provides many important principles.

Points of Contact. Paul began with an observation about the religiousness of the Athenians. “People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious”⁶ (17:22).

⚠ Some have taken Paul’s statement about **the religiousness of Athens** to be a criticism and so have used the word “superstitious” instead of “religious” (see KJV). But this interpretation does not fit with the rest of the speech. Most modern translations prefer the word “religious.”

Paul was neither criticizing nor complimenting the people of Athens. He was simply making an observation about the life of the Athenians. They were a religious people. The word religious essentially means “respect for or fear of the supernatural.”⁶ The form this religiosity took was the worship of many gods, evidenced by the numerous public idols (17:16). Paul knew that idolatry would not save the Athenians, so he argued against it and called them to repent

6 Alan Richardson, editor, “Superstition,” *A Theological Word Book of the Bible* (London: SCM Press, Ltd., 1950), 253.

(vv. 24–30). But he also knew that behind this idolatry was a respect for the supernatural.

Paul had found a point of contact with the Athenians. Their sense of the supernatural provided a steppingstone to explain the truth about God. They were in agreement about the reality of the supernatural world. Paul mentioned their religiousness so that he could lead them into the new truths he wanted to present. In the same way, evangelism today should look for a suitable opening to present the gospel.

The Unknown God. Through his comment about religion, Paul won the attention of the Athenians. He then went deeper and identified their yearnings. He told them how he had arrived at the idea that they were “very religious.” He had “walked around and looked carefully at [their] objects of worship.” He said, “I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD” (17:22–23). This was evidence of a deep, unsatisfied yearning in the Athenians, and Paul used it as



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We too can approach people with the belief that the gospel fulfills their longings.

an opportunity to introduce God to them.

The Greeks attributed the various natural phenomena to the gods. Different gods were said to be responsible for troubles and for good fortunes, so they wanted to be on the good side of all the gods. But they were not certain that they knew all the gods, so they dedicated an altar to an unknown god “to ensure that no

god was overlooked to the possible harm of the city.”⁷ This altar was an admission that their knowledge of the supernatural was incomplete, and Paul used this as a launching pad for his description of the God of the Bible. They had set up their altar in an attempt to cover all possibilities. Paul knew the God who was missing from the Athenian worship; He was the only true God. He introduced this God to the Athenians: “So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you” (17:23).

⁷ E. M. Blaiklock, “The Acts of the Apostles,” *The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1959), 140.

Christ Fulfills Their Aspirations. Paul saw the worship of the “unknown god” as an expression of thirst for God. So he approached the Athenians with that understanding. ■

▶ Blaise Pascal described **the thirst for God** in terms of a God-shaped vacuum in the human soul. This thirst expresses itself in various forms. In Athens, it expressed itself in the form of an altar to an unknown god.

We too can approach people with the belief that the gospel fulfills their longings. Their search for fulfillment may take forms that we do not recognize or find appealing, but we must look beyond the form to the Godless emptiness that causes it. Then we must show how Christ fills this void.

The present widespread interest in spirituality can become a steppingstone for Christian witness. The expressions it takes may vary in form, and we may find it difficult to engage with those who pursue such activities. The idols in Athens were revolting to Paul, but he used them as an opportunity to show the people that only God could give them what they were looking for. The spiritual pursuits of many today show us that the search for something deeper is ongoing.

The basic human need is for a relationship with

God, but sin keeps many from recognizing this basic need. We may tell someone the moment we meet him that he needs a relationship with God and that he must repent of his sin, only to hear him respond that he doesn't have any such need.

There are other needs that are more easily recognized, such as the need to feel safe and secure. We can start with this need and from it direct people to the more basic need—a relationship with God. But if we start there, we may be dismissed as having nothing relevant to say. An effective witness tries to identify felt needs and demonstrates that Christ fulfills them.



The basic human need is for a relationship with God, but sin keeps many from recognizing this basic need.

From Felt Needs to the Gospel

Christ is the answer. But we must discover the specific questions our audience is asking, even if those questions may not be what we think they are or what we think they should be.

Many feel they don't need religion. They feel quite adequate to face the challenges of life without God's

help. We may be tempted to conclude that they are not asking any questions of religious significance.

The problem may be that we are looking in the wrong place. Our lifestyles may be so different from theirs that we don't know the deep yearnings of their hearts. They do have religious inclinations. But they take forms that we may not recognize as religious. We must be careful and creative when trying to find an open door to share the gospel.

But using our creativity in analyzing the human predicament is not enough on its own. We must also expound the gospel in such a way that our hearers know that Jesus is the answer to their questions. Sometimes our methods of presenting the gospel are so formulaic that we lose our hearers. They warm up to our analysis of the problem, but the solution we present leaves them cold, with no desire to identify with it. 🐦

🐦 *Jesus' encounter with the woman at the well (JOHN 4:1-26) is a perfect example of **presenting the gospel** in a way that engages the needs and aspirations of the audience.*

When we proclaim the gospel, we interact with the aspirations and needs of our audience. A good witness is a student of both the Word and the world. Karl Barth is reported to have said that the preacher should have the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other.



Analyzing the human predicament is not enough. We must also expound the gospel in such a way that our hearers know that Jesus is the answer to their questions.

We must know the gospel thoroughly and communicate it faithfully and clearly. We must also know the world thoroughly. This knowledge of the world is the context in which we present the gospel. And we must be careful to present the whole gospel.

Grappling with the Uniqueness of Christ

A missionary about to return home after 28 years in Sri Lanka was interviewed by that country's leading English-language Sunday paper. He explained how he had changed after coming to a multi-religious country.

"I was rather intolerant of other religions at the time and thought that mine was the only true one," he said. "But all that changed during a visit to Anuradhapura" (a religious holy place).

The missionary went on to say that he experienced such a sense of peace in that place that he felt he

was truly in the presence of God. He began to think that the difference in faiths did not matter. From that experience he said he learned “the lesson that all religions, lived up to their highest ideals, have the common threads of love and compassion in them. So,” he continued, “from that moment my ministry became not creed but need.”⁸

This missionary reflects a syncretistic attitude that is rapidly gaining popularity, even in the church. Many Christians are living in environments not conducive to maintaining belief in the uniqueness of Christ and are giving it up. But many texts in the Bible proclaim Christ as the only way to salvation:

- *“Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God’s wrath remains on them”* (JOHN 3:36).
- *“I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me”* (JOHN 14:6).
- *“Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved”* (ACTS 4:12).
- *“For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus”* (1 TIMOTHY 2:5).

8 Alfreda de Silva, “Change of Heart after Anuradhapura Visit,” *The Sunday Observer*, March 18, 1984.

- *“Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life”*
(1 JOHN 5:12).

Sustaining this belief today is a challenge, especially when we meet good and decent people who belong to other faiths.

All under Sin. By human standards, people may be good. But when judged by God’s standards, all people fall hopelessly short. Even a comparatively good person such as the prophet Isaiah, when he had a vision of the glory of God, cried out in despair, “Woe to me! . . . I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty” (ISAIAH 6:5).

The fact that every person in his or her natural state is guilty before a holy God, and is therefore lost, has been largely forgotten. Much Christian preaching, teaching, and writing emphasize the blessings the gospel brings. The blessings are important, but there should be a corresponding emphasis on the seriousness of sin and our separation from God.

Failure to emphasize both sides of the gospel is one reason people find it difficult to accept

that there is no salvation without faith in Christ. They don't see salvation as a transformation from death to life (ROMANS 6:23), from darkness to light (1 PETER 2:9), from rejection to acceptance by God (ROMANS 5:9–11).

God's Solution. God's method of bringing people to a right relationship with Himself is beautiful and unexpected. Instead of earning it, "righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe" (ROMANS 3:22). People must believe in Jesus. That is the only way to salvation.

We could not save ourselves by our own efforts; therefore, God acted in Christ to offer us salvation. "And [we] are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith" (3:24–25). These two verses exude grace. What we could not do for our salvation, God has done for us.



*God's method
of bringing
people to a
right relationship
with Himself
is beautiful and
unexpected.*

Our only hope is the free gift of God's grace through faith in Christ and His work:

- *“This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe” (ROMANS 3:22).*
- *“[God is] the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus” (3:26).*
- *“For we maintain that a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law” (3:28).*
- *“There is only one God, who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith” (3:30).*

Believing is not merely giving mental assent to what Christ did and then living any way we want. Faith that saves has three important steps. First, we must admit that we cannot help ourselves. Second, we must accept what Christ has done on our behalf. Third, we must entrust ourselves to Him and His way, accepting His way as our way. This implies that when He becomes our Savior, He also automatically becomes our Lord.

Why is faith so important for salvation? Faith is the opposite of the sin that separates us from God. The basic sin of humanity is seeking independence from God. When we exercise faith, we reject our

own attempts at saving ourselves and controlling our lives and submit to the way God provided for us in Christ Jesus.



Sharing the gospel is the most important conversation we can have with someone. The way we share the gospel is often as important as ensuring that we present the full gospel. Being the messenger of a life-changing message means being a humble servant of all people, knowing the cares and concerns of our audience, and creatively finding an open door to show that Christ is the answer to the questions they ask. Then we can share the gospel: We are separated from God by our sin but Jesus has done all that we need to be reconciled to Him.

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.



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