

Q&A: How can we best share the good news with friends who are indifferent due to self-reliance?

Sarah writes:

Hi Will,

How can we best share the good news with friends who are totally indifferent to the message of the gospel? Particularly when the indifference is due to self-reliance (working hard, planning ahead and being the best they can be in the responsibilities and relationships they have).

[This is a Q&A question that has been submitted through this blog. You can submit a question (anonymously if you like) here: <http://briggs.id.au/jour/qanda/>]

Thanks Sarah. An interesting question. Allow me to answer it generally, and then more specifically.



Generally speaking: My first inclination is to say, “Perhaps you can’t, you may have to wait for the right time.”

Don’t get me wrong here, I’m not suggesting that sharing the good news of Jesus is a bad thing to do; it’s just that at any given time it may be that you’ve said and done all that you can.

I think of Jesus with the rich young ruler in Mark 10:17-27. This young man was pious and upright, yet the gospel for him was “‘Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.’” Jesus delivered that message with a more perfect understanding than any of us could ever muster. Yet the man still walked away. And Jesus let him.

I think of Jesus’ instructions to the disciples that he sends out to the villages in Luke 10:1-23. They had a gospel of peace to proclaim, which they did. Yet Jesus fully expected that in some places they would not be welcomed and their peace would “return to them.” Their instruction was to move on.

Now, I recognise that in both these cases, even though Jesus is talking about *people* who are indifferent to the message, that is not quite the same as *friends* who are indifferent to the gospel. So there’s nothing here that should suggest a “moving on” from the friendship or anything like that! Friendship is valuable for its own sake. Be friends with your friends. Pray for your friends. Share your life with your friends.

But there *is* a certain wisdom in knowing that there *is* a time and place for explicit evangelism, and that may not be right now! Within a friendship, it may be that at some point the wisdom of 1 Peter 3:15 will apply: “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect...”

More specifically you mention the particular circumstance “when the indifference is due to self-reliance (working hard, planning ahead and being the best they can be in the responsibilities and relationships they have).”

Thank you for this. What you have done is an important part of the *missiological* task, which is to consider your context and to be aware of the prevailing presuppositions,

assumptions, motivations and patterns that manifest in its culture. It's remarkable how often this necessary work is overlooked.

You have identified "self-reliance" and it is, indeed, prevalent in our culture, including within the church. We often find that our *talking* about the gospel is ineffective because, *functionally*, the culture we embrace as Christians and as a church proclaims its self-reliance more loudly.

Having identified this characteristic, what you are able to do is to be deliberately *counter-cultural*. This means we think about how our life can proclaim *faith* and *dependence* on God, and we turn aside from self-reliance. This consequentially means that we need to be *real*, vulnerable, and emotionally honest.

After all, when our friends get to the end of themselves, (which we all do at some point), what will we say and do? A false-gospel of self-reliance in the name of Jesus ("Let's buck up and smile and get on with life") will not bring any sense of hope, peace, or restoration, and certainly not conviction and repentance. Rather, our readiness to "give an answer to everyone who asks" will need to take the counter-cultural form, that shares in the suffering ("I've been there also, my friend.") and lays hold of hope ("This is where I lean on Jesus.")

So adding to your general readiness to share the good news, put your missiology into practice. Reflect on yourself and your culture. Be counter-cultural and Christlike. Come in close to the real world of your friends, *especially* when that's a costly hard thing to do. Walk the hard roads next to them. Simply live out your faith.

Q&A: What does it mean to be co-heirs with Christ?

Sarah asks:

Hi Will,

What does it mean to be co-heirs with Christ in Romans 8:17?

It must be unfathomable, outrageous grace to inherit all that Christ has as God the Son!

This is way better than Eden isn't it?

What does being co-heirs with Jesus look like expressed in our relationship with him for eternity – how does it fit in with us being the worshippers and him being worshipped? I suppose I mean what does it mean to be alongside God as heirs but being glorified humans, not divine?

[This is a Q&A question that has been submitted through this blog. You can submit a question (anonymously if you like) here: <http://briggs.id.au/jour/qanda/>]

Thanks Sarah,



The passage you are quoting is (to use the NIV) Romans 8:14-17:

14 For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God. 15 The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by

him we cry, 'Abba, Father.' 16 The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. 17 Now if we are children, then we are heirs – heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.

To respond to your first two points. Yes, this is “unfathomable, outrageous grace” and yes, “this is way better than Eden”!

You ask what does it *mean*?

Firstly, we need to grasp what Christ's inheritance *is*. The answer is big and simple: Christ's inheritance is *everything*. It isn't always spelled out; after all, how do you detail everything? What might it include? *Big things*, like “eternal life”, the “new heaven and the new earth”, and “peace.” It's *everything*.

The go-to passage that helps us out is Hebrews 1:1-2

*1 In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, 2 but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed **heir of all things**, and through whom also he made the universe.*

You might also be familiar with the “attitude of Christ” that Paul espouses in Philippians 2:1-11. This passage talks about the “self-emptying” (the technical term is *kenosis*) of Jesus, “who, though he was in the form of God... emptied himself, taking the form of a slave... he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross.” Paul then talks about Christ's *exaltation*, and in many ways he is talking about Christ's *inheritance* – what God the Father *rightly* gives the Son who gave himself up for his people:

9 Therefore God also highly exalted him

and gave him the name
that is above every name,
10 so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
11 and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

Christ's inheritance is the *reverse kenosis*, that comes not from himself, but from his Father.

And it's not just every *thing*, it is also *all authority*. Just look at Matthew 28:18 or 1 Corinthians 15:24 and many other places. Jesus really is the "Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End (Revelation 21:6).

That's his inheritance. Of which we are *co-heirs*.

That's amazing.

We can pull it apart theologically, but the narrative is simple: The heart of God has always been to share the fullness of himself with his people. We see it in Eden. We see it as he reaches out to Abram, making his promises, intervening in history. We see it as his presence goes with his people out of Egypt, through the sea, and on into the wilderness years. We see it as he speaks through his prophets. We see it as he nurtures a king whose heart is after his own. We see it as he pours himself out as a child, and in sharing our humanity, *covers us* with his grace and his purpose. He now shares with us his sonship, his sweet heart of faith, his trust and dependence, his obedience even to the point of death, and the blessings that rightly flow from it.

We are "in Christ" as he covers us, and Christ is "in us" by his Spirit. Salvation catches us up into the relational dynamics of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Thinking of

salvation without any sense of sharing in Christ's inheritance, is like conceiving of a banquet without any reference to food; you can sort of imagine something in the abstract, but it doesn't really make any sense.

But your secondary question draws the meaning out even more. You ask, "*What does being co-heirs with Jesus look like expressed in our relationship with him for eternity – how does it fit in with us being the worshippers and him being worshipped?*"

I think there's something here: God *is* a worshipper. The object of God's worship is himself. This is not vanity, it is truthful *delight* and entirely appropriate. The Father *adores* the Son. The Son is *devoted* to the Father. The Spirit *raises up* the name of God! Surely we can say that Jesus, as the incarnate Son of God, rightly *worships* his Father, perfectly, throughout his life and especially in his death.

To be co-heirs with Christ is, therefore, to share in his role as a worshipper. In Christ, we offer our sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving and, in Christ, it is worthy and honourable and *received* in great delight by Almighty Creator God.

Again, there's something amazing about that.

But does our inheritance with Christ also mean an inheritance in the worship he *receives*? In some sense, yes, but I mean this very carefully: as Christ's people, we share in the worship *he* receives, not in any worship we receive, but in the worship *he* receives.

What I'm trying to grasp is in this account from the end of the book, in Revelation 21:9-27:

9 One of the seven angels... came and said to me, 'Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.' 10 And he carried me away in the Spirit to a mountain great and high, and

showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. 11 It shone with the glory of God, and its brilliance was like that of a very precious jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal.

John then goes on to talk about the gates and walls of the New Jerusalem and includes imagery of apostolic foundations and things like that. The overall picture is one of beauty, and purity, of the Bride of Christ, who shines (and this is the point) *with the glory of God*. Jesus covers his bride with *his* glory. *That* is our inheritance. It is not *our* glory. It is *his*. But we share in it. All creation will gaze upon us, his people, and worship him.

And that brings us back to Romans 8:17, where we started, because there it is in the second part of the verse:

Now if we are children, then we are heirs – heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.

It is outrageously amazing.

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Q&A: How do we bring about cultural change in our churches?

A Friend asks:

My question is, how do we, who are in Christian leadership encourage and bring about cultural change in our churches? I am sure that it is already a question that you are grappling with and probably have no easy answers to.

In the past I would have simply said the main component is leading by example. Lead and others will simply change. In recent experience I would say that, unfortunately that only seems to work when the people around are teachable and actively pursuing growth.

Previously I would have also said teach from the Scriptures and let them speak for themselves. But again, I have seen time and time again a misunderstanding of those Scriptures even when it is spelled out in black and white.

And then what do you do when there are different cultures in the mix? I don't mean racial cultures, but church cultures. How do we authentically worship when so many different priorities are given to the various components of what constitutes a worship service or Bible study? How do we encourage true disciples in a way that is maintainable in Western society and yet still confronting, challenging and deep?

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Thank you, dear friend. What a joyfully fundamental question! Answer this, and you will have answered the cry of the heart of every pastor who takes their calling seriously. Books have been written about this. Even Archbishops' Councils wrestle with the conundrum – I reflected on a recent attempt at “Setting



God's People Free" not too long ago.

You're right. I am grappling with it, and I don't have any easy answers. There is a whole bunch of theory out there about changing organisational culture etc. In my mind, however, it's like mentoring and spiritual direction; it relies on *discernment* more than anything else and therefore can only truly be known in context and in practice, not in theory. So here follows some random thoughts from what I've seen in the real world:

The **first thing** I want to do in response is to affirm the premise of the question. *Cultural change* is to a church what *sanctification* is to a person. Just as individuals Christians are called to grow into maturity in Christ, so churches are called to grow into maturity as the *Body* of Christ.

The road of maturation for an individual is, necessarily, "a long road of obedience in the same direction" (I think I'm quoting Eugene Peterson there). It involves confronting one's past, one's brokenness, one's fears and pains. It involves repenting of sin, and seizing the lifegiving ways of God with a firm faith in his grace. It can involve times of trial and failure, as well as the temptations of both success and boredom. This is something we all understand.

That leadership task is first and foremost not about the "professional" tasks of institutional refurbishment and resource management, it is the "pastoral" task of leading a *community* on a long road of obedience. As I said many years ago, this means "we have to talk about the real issues – rebellion, idolatry, lack of belief, hard-heartedness, and unfaithfulness – rather than the excuses of broken systems."

More recently I have reflected a little more deeply on this. Culture itself can be conceived of in terms of the "stories we tell each other", i.e. it is grounded in a *narrative* that

encapsulates the collective worldview. A *racist* culture will share a narrative about the inhumanity of different ethnicities, for instance. Similarly, the grounding of an individual person's life can also be thought of in terms of narrative: what story helps us conceive of ourselves within the world? This is why we consider things like "self-talk" when we help an individual to reflect. Individuals and churches share a *narrative world*, i.e. a *cultural context*.

The Christian task is to make sure we are operating out of the *correct* narrative so that we conceive of ourselves and the world according to God's *truth*, and where we find ourselves in *his* story. In fact, we can think of the conversion experience in terms of an exchange of *stories*, where we die to an old narrative of sin and self-centredness, and are raised to find ourselves in another story in which Jesus is King, and we are forgiven and embraced. I alluded to this in a recent sermon on wisdom in Job, if you have some time to listen.

The sad fact is, in these terms, some churches, as much as any individual, need to convert to Christ. That is the *cultural* change that is needed. And it is an ongoing journey. As the saying goes: "I AM saved, I am BEING saved, I WILL be saved"

But your question is **how do we bring cultural change about?**

Firstly, understand that just as with individual sanctification, it is not entirely humanly possible. "Work out your salvation with fear and trembling," Paul says in *Philippians 2*, "for it is **God** who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfil his good purpose." Work it out, because God is at work in you, *and* in the church. Or as someone wise I know says, "We are Christ's church, and **he** will grow us."

This isn't a cop-out, it's a *focus*. And the practical application is this: **It begins with worship**. Sort out

the *upward* focus of your life first, work on the *upward* focus of the church first, and all manner of other things will sort themselves out.

This rubs up against one of your subquestions about authentic worship in competing church cultures. One form of worship can only compete with another if we are worshipping the wrong thing! Yes, we need to attend to our attitudes, and recognise different styles, and compromise a bit about liturgical rigour. But I've only ever seen this work when the attitude has been "we are all here to help one another to worship Jesus."

Secondly, your negative experiences don't mean you had the wrong idea. You talk about leading by example, and about preaching the word. Sometimes they don't seem to "work." That doesn't mean that they are the wrong thing to do.

In fact, they are the right thing to do. Our *story* changes, our *culture* shifts, as individuals and as churches, when we pay heed to what the Lord has to say to us. He has spoken the words of life, and by God's grace, that word is present for us to read, hear and receive. **Preach the word**, brothers and sisters! Do it without fear or favour, without tickling ears. And by some miracle, and the power of the Spirit, that word will take root and shift our story.

Similarly, **preach with your deeds**. As Paul exhorted *Timothy* set an example for the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith and in purity.

In both cases, of courses, the preaching may seem fruitless. People are hardened to the word, unteachable; they mishandle the Word of God to suit their own ends. You can't do anything about that. But we preach the word both in and out of season.

As a leader, of course, there is a sense in which we must go ahead. We must preach to ourselves first. We must attend to our own sanctification. It is often the case that churches

“catch up” to the culture of their leaders. Unless the leader is willing to attend to the long walk of obedience in themselves, they are likely to be content in their existing *church* culture where their insecurities are stabilised and their sins are acceptable.

So it's an absolute imperative: Sanctification begins with me. Personally, I have to say that to myself, even today.

Thirdly, you ask about encouraging “true disciples... in a way that is maintainable in Western society and yet still confronting, challenging and deep?”

In my experience, what you are hoping for here is blocked by the blindness of the culture that you're hoping to change. In the West our culture is significantly shaped by consumerism and individualism. When the term “discipleship” is used in churches it has often been emptied of its real meaning and held captive by the culture; it is reduced to a product by which consumer Christians are given “nice ideas by which I might build a successful spiritual life.” It has elements of truth, but it has a self-righteous posture; there is an incomprehension that we might have to have our story shifted.

We need to cut across that dynamic somehow, and sometimes we need to be upfront about it. The gospel is encouraging and lifegiving, and it is about being *unmade* as much as it is about being *remade*. The gospel is about conviction and confrontation as much as it is about affirmation. We can set expectations, explaining to people that we are expecting to be *undone* by God, in fact *hoping* to be challenged and confronted with ourselves. Otherwise, what's the point?

We also need to give them the tools to proceed. A good tool is the ability to question our own cultural assumptions, to question ourselves. Help them to affirm what can be affirmed and question what needs to be questioned. Push for the story underneath the top layer. Ask “why?” a lot. “Why do we do

that? Why, really?" What's under the facade? "We have words to explain ourselves, but what do we *really* believe?" It's the difference, as they say, between "espoused theology" and "actual theology". The exposition of Moral Therapeutic Deism is an excellent case study in this; it is the *actual* religion of much of the Western church.

Above all, this is a pastoral task. The incarnation teaches us about how God enters into our world in order to bring us out of darkness into his wonderful light. We must have the same attitude of Christ. Enter the culture. Affirm what can be affirmed. Work out where the ugly bits rub against the gospel, and then bring that light to bear, beginning in yourself. Walk the hard road, and when others join you in it, rejoice.

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