**5 Necessities for Engaging Skeptics With the Gospel**

**By Ben Mandrell**

Is gospel ministry harder in certain places than in others throughout the U.S.? Anyone in church leadership could make a legitimate case that their context is a difficult one to reach.

My first pastorate was at an established church in Jackson, Tenn. Before moving back to Tennessee to lead LifeWay, I was a church planter in the Denver, Colo. area.

The ministry challenges in skeptical, post-Christian places like Denver are scary. When you can feel the opposition or skepticism toward Christianity every day, there’s a sense of insecurity.

But that sense of danger is refreshing, because it breaks you of making assumptions about what people believe about Jesus and His gospel.

Regardless of where you live and lead, here are some principles to keep in mind. After all, there are skeptics of the gospel in every community.

1. DON’T MAKE ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT WHO IS OR ISN’T LISTENING TO SERMONS.

During my early years of ministry in the heavily-churched South, I picked up a habit of conveying an “us versus them” mentality. I would address a subject as if the people I talked about weren’t in the room.

I would talk about why this is wrong and how we can’t tolerate that and that we need to stand up against this issue confronting the church.

But after I moved to Colorado, it dawned on me that the people who disagree with me actually were in the room. So I softened the way I approached these subjects—but not in a way that comprised my convictions.

I would say something like, “With this issue, there are some who believe \_\_\_\_\_\_.”

And I would chase down that line of thinking to make it reasonable: “I can see how someone would think \_\_\_\_. Yet here’s what Scripture calls us to think about that issue.”

By naming the rationale or heart behind the worldview I described, I could build bridges with people who oppose the biblical viewpoint of topics discussed during the sermon.

2. DEMONSTRATE RESPECT FOR PEOPLE OF OTHER BELIEF SYSTEMS.

Demonstrating respect often means creating space for a church member to invite an unsaved friend with confidence the visitor won’t feel attacked.

For example, instead of saying, “Muslims believe that works get us to heaven and they have five pillars they follow to gain acceptance with Allah,” try something like, “Our Muslim friends would say we’re made right with God by doing righteous things.”

By calling them “friends” we’re stating—without altering our worldview—we care for them and what they believe is their right to believe it.

In a situation like this, the goal for us is to show anyone in the room that he or she is valued—regardless of their worldview.

3. MAKE AN EMOTIONAL CONNECTION.

When we lead in a community that’s skeptical of the gospel, certain cultural issues can be emotionally charged.

When I pastored in Colorado, I found that showing emotional concern for people who hold an opposing worldview could open doors for effective ministry.

Many are just apathetic the gospel. But when someone becomes confrontational in response to your teaching or ministry philosophy, you’re hitting on something that matters to them.

We had neighbors in Denver who started visiting our church. After some time, they asked me to meet with them. During the conversation the woman asked if we affirm homosexual couples.

When I shared where we landed on that issue—the biblical view of one man and one woman for life—she began to cry.

I asked why this upset her. She explained her sister had come out as same-sex attracted early in life and received horrible treatment from other kids at school.

In loving defense of her sister’s dignity as a human being, this neighbor wanted to be a champion for gay rights.

It was easy to understand her pain. Everyone has a story. And we can’t change that by simply reading Bible verses to them. From a position of empathy, the Church should seek to understand why people with opposing worldviews have certain convictions.

4. MOBILIZE PEOPLE TO ENGAGE OUTSIDE OF THE SUNDAY SERVICE.

When Jesus washed the disciples’ feet He said, “Now as I have done, go and do likewise.”

This is leadership by example, and there are tools to demonstrate how to take the mission outside of the church.

Storytelling

I would often tell stories in the pulpit about people I wanted to impact—people who didn’t share my worldview and who weren’t interested in my church.

But I would do so without sharing information that would comprise relationships.

Modeling

When I addressed controversial topics, I also modeled how I would like people to handle that conversation if it happened in the church lobby, in the front yard with next-door neighbors, or at their work cubicle.

This often means asking questions. When our neighbors asked whether or not we affirm homosexual relationships, I leaned into Jesus’ method of engaging in delicate conversation: He often responded to a question with a question instead answering the question.

Confrontational evangelism

Most people will be uncomfortable with this approach, but there’s a place for confrontational evangelism. The New Testament has examples of people confronting others with the truth—and leading them to Christ on the spot.

Make evangelism something everyone does—not just those who have the bravery to go out and win souls.

But if that’s your only hook in the evangelism waters, not many in your congregation will participate.

Relational evangelism

In my experience, most Christians don’t feel comfortable with confrontational evangelism, but they feel at ease having unchurched neighbors in their home for a meal. This is a form of relational evangelism—building relationships that could one day lead to spiritual conversations.

When people join your church, they’re signing up to live on mission in the community, at work, at the gym, or wherever their daily lives take them. We need to give them tools to do that well.

5. ADDRESS THESE THREE KINDS OF PEOPLE BY THE END OF YOUR SERMONS.

One of the most effective changes I’ve ever made in my preaching was the application toward the end.

After a few minutes developing the biblical context I ended most messages with something like this: “Let me raise three questions around this subject that I think are sitting out in the seats today—one from a believer, one from a nonbeliever, and one from a student.”

An example of a question I could answer from a non-believer (or a student, since they have similar questions) is, “You say your Holy Book is true. How can you claim yours is true and everyone else’s is false?”

By posing these questions, I could identify with groups of skeptical people, acknowledging the validity of their questions.

Caring for a skeptic of the gospel often means offering a listening ear before we offer biblical commentary.

It also means we operate our ministries as if those dear people are in the room with us, demonstrate kindness and respect toward those who disagree with us, show empathy to their hurts, mobilize those we lead to be extensions of gospel ministry, and anticipate their questions—especially if you’re one who has a pulpit on Sundays.

The above article, “5 Necessities for Engaging Skeptics With the Gospel,” was written by Ben Mandrell.

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This article may not be written by an Apostolic author, but it contains many excellent principles and concepts that can be adapted to most churches. As the old saying goes, “Eat the meat. Throw away the bones.”