

Levels of Openness (and Illustrations)

A. Formulating the Gospel to the Perceived Spiritual Needs:

1. Sensitivity and perception are needed to be open to the individual that is being shared with. This will allow the Gospel presentation to be tailored to the individual.
2. Knowing the person's spiritual background will help you to understand some presuppositions he may have. This includes religious upbringing, as well as any contact he may have had with the Gospel in the past.
3. The person may mention a death in the family or some other event which may open the door on the spiritual. Be sensitive, but you can use these things as illustrations or applications of biblical truth.
4. If you can see one or several ideas or presuppositions hindering the person from accepting Christ, formulate the Gospel to meet those presuppositions head on. It is wise not to start an intellectual or theological debate which often leads nowhere. The best approach is to show them what God's Word has to say on the giving misunderstanding, and let them deal with God's Word.
5. In a predominantly Christian land, many will pretend to be Christian (Ps. 81:15 KJV, NASB). These must hear the Gospel, in order that they might understand the commitment required.
6. It must always be kept in mind that the eternal destiny of the individual is at stake in understanding the Gospel. Tact, love and boldness are needed to keep to the important issues.

B. Different Levels of Openness to the Gospel:⁴²

Introduction: Among the most disconcerting aspects of evangelism is the range of responses to the Gospel. This is especially true when a neighbor, friend, co-worker or family member do not respond to the Gospel as we would like. Sometimes there is a positive response which later turns into a sour relationship. What then?

This study seeks to look at the responses of various individuals. Jesus' Parable of the Sower gives a biblical buttress for such a study (Matthew 13:3-9, 18-23, Mark 4:3-9, 13-20, Luke 8:5-8, 11-15). In this parable, Jesus spoke of four types of seed. Some seed fell on the road, some on rocky soil, some among thorns and some on good soil. Likewise as we sow the seed of the Gospel, we will elicit

⁴² Many introductions to evangelism contain hints on how to reach various kinds of individuals. See R.A. Torrey *How to Work for Christ* (New York; Fleming H. Revell Company, 1901), pp. 33-170, for a biblical look at different levels of openness to the Gospel and how to deal with them. Also see G. Michael Cocoris, *Evangelism: A Biblical Approach* (Chicago; Moody Press, 1984), pp. 149-165. Eugene M. Harrison spends a good portion of his *How to Win Souls* (Wheaton, IL; Scripture Press, 1952, pp. 54-139) dealing with various types of people, as does William Evans in *Personal Soul-Winning* (Chicago; Moody Press, 1910).

varying responses. There will be those who are closed to the Gospel. Others will be indifferent to the claims of Christ. Some will be spiritually stagnant, they will have heard the message without allowing it to impact their lives. And still others will be open to the claims of Christ.

Let us note these various responses and consider how we ought to deal with them in a biblical fashion.

1. The Open Person:

- a. Some biblical examples of people open to the Gospel:
 - 1) Andrew, Matt. 4:18-20, Mark 1:16-18, John 1:36-40
 - 2) Peter, Matt. 4:18-20, Mark 1:16-18, Luke 5:10-11, John 1:41-42
 - 3) James and John, Matt. 4:21-22, Mark 1:19-20, Luke 5:10-11
 - 4) Philip, John 1:43-44
 - 5) Nathanael, John 1:45-51
 - 6) Paralytic, Matt. 9:2-8, Mark 2:1-5, Luke 5:18-26
 - 7) Levi (or Matthew), Matt. 9:9, Mark 2:14, Luke 5:27-28
 - 8) Man from Gerasenes, Matt. 8:28-34, Mark 5:1-20, Luke 8:26-39
 - 9) Woman with Hemorrhage, Mark 5:25-34
 - 10) Syrophenician Woman, Matt. 15:21-28, Mark 7:24-30
 - 11) Zaccheus, Luke 19:5-10
 - 12) Nicodemus, John 3:1-21
 - 13) Woman at the Well, John 4:6-29
 - 14) Royal Officer, John 4:46-53
 - 15) Man Blind from Birth, John 9:35-39
 - 16) Sinful Woman, Matt. 26:6-13, Mark 14:3-9, Luke 7:36-50, John 12:1-8
 - 17) Thief on the cross, Luke 23:42-43
 - 18) Soldier at crucifixion, Matt. 27:54, Mark 15:39, Luke 23:47
 - 18) Lame beggar, Acts 3:3-6
 - 20) Ethiopian Eunuch, Acts 8:26-41
 - 21) Cornelius, Acts 10
 - 22) Proconsul, Acts 13:6-12
 - 23) Lydia, Acts 16:13-15, 40
 - 24) Jailer, Acts 16:23-24
 - 25) Titius Justus, Acts 18:7
 - 26) Crispus, Acts 18:8
 - 27) Apollos, Acts 18:24-28
 - 28) Dionysius the Aeropagite and Damaris, Acts 17:34
- b. Profile of an open heart:
 - 1) An open heart is often recognizable, Acts 14:9 (cf. Mt. 6:22-23)
 - 2) Look for a contrite heart, Ps. 51:19; Is. 57:15; Matt. 5:3-4; Luke 6:21
 - 3) Look for a man of peace, Luke 10:6; Matt 5:5, 9
- c. Do not delay (Pr. 3:27-28), but take advantage of a heart opened by the Holy Spirit. We know that no one seeks God without God's prompting, John 15:16, Rom. 3:11. However, they may close up in the future (Jn. 3:8) or they may never get another opportunity to respond to the Gospel.

“Wherever you have reason to believe that a person within your reach is awakened, do not sleep till you have poured in the light upon his mind, and have

tried to bring him to *immediate repentance*. Then is the time to press the subject with effect.”⁴³

- d. Share the Gospel:
 - 1) Make sure that the person is following and understanding the Gospel through occasional questions.
 - 2) Explain the need for a commitment.
 - 3) Ask the person to pray to make a commitment to Jesus.
- e. You may sense that the person is open but not ready right away:
 - 1) Give appropriate warning verses (found below in section on “The Non-Committal Person)
 - 2) Pray with them for their heart and eyes to be open.
 - 3) Pray for them, for another opportunity to share the Gospel, and for their heart to remain open.
 - 4) Actively seek out opportunities to meet with the person.
- f. Follow-up:
 - 1) Pray for the person while you are still with him/her.
 - 2) Share one of several assurance verses to encourage the young believer, John 5:24, Rom. 10:9, I John 5:13. Ask him/her to memorize one of these.
 - 3) Leave a Bible or New Testament with the person if they do not have one readily available, if you have one for them.
 - 4) Try to get the person’s name and address, and seek to set up an appointment within the next week.
 - 5) If the person is not the same sex, it is preferable to seek someone else of the same sex and age to follow the person up.
- g. Illustration: Colin in Minneapolis area.

2. The Closed Person:

- a. Some biblical examples of closed persons: (some of these will also be dealt with under the heading “Messengers of Satan”)
 - 1) Individuals:
 - a) High priest, Matt. 26:57, 62, 63, 65, Acts 5:17
 - b) Captain of the Temple guard, Acts 4:1, 5:24
 - c) Saul of Tarsus, Acts 7:58-8:3, 9:1
 - d) Herod the king, Matt. 2:1 (the Great) Acts 12:1-3, 19 (Agrippa I)
 - d) Elymas the magician, Acts 13:6-11
 - e) Demetrius the silversmith, Acts 19:24ff.
 - f) The ethnarch of Damascus under Aretas, 2 Cor 11:32-33
 - f) Alexander the coppersmith, II Tim. 4:14-15
 - 2) Groups of people:
 - a) Scribes, Matt. 9:3, 12:38, 15:1, 26:57, 27:41-43
 - b) Pharisees, Matt. 9:11, 34, 12:2, 14, 24, 38, 15:1, 12-14, 19:3, 21:45-46, 22:34, 41, 27:62-66
 - c) Jesus’ hometown people, Matt. 13:57
 - d) Chief priests and elders of the people, Matt. 21:23, 45-46, 26:3-5, 14 (chief priests), 47, 57 (elders), 59, 27:1, 6 (chief priests), 12, 20, 41-43, 62-66 (chief priests), 28:11-15, Acts 4:1 (priests), 23, 5:24 (chief priests)
 - e) Sadducees, Matt. 22:23, 34, Acts 4:1

⁴³ Charles Finney, *Finney on Revival*, pp. 68-69. Points 12 and 13 of his 22 points on evangelism.

- f) Council, Acts 4:15, 5:34, 6:15
 - g) Synagogue of the freedmen, Acts 6:9
 - h) The Jews, Acts 9:23, 29 (Hellenistic Jews), 12:3, 13:45, 50, 14:19 ...
- b. A closed heart is often evident, Acts 13:9-11 (cf. Mt. 6:22-23).
- c. When sharing the Gospel:
- 1) All the Christian is accountable for is to seek to sow the seed of the Gospel in love:
 - a) Some people will be closed
 - b) Be firm and clear, but do not push too hard. Let the Holy Spirit cut through.
 - c) Jesus showed righteous anger when dealing with certain closed people (Mt. 23:13ff., Jn. 2:13-22), as did the Apostle Paul (Acts 13:9-11)-- however, make sure that there is no anger due to pride (Pr. 29:8).
 - d) "Like a trampled spring and a polluted well is a righteous man who gives way before the wicked," Pr. 25:26
 - 2) It is often good to leave the closed person with something to make him think (Pr. 26:5, II Cor. 5:20):
 - a) "Are you sure that you would go to heaven if you died tonight?"
 - b) "Remember that you will stand before God and give an account some day! Are you ready for that?"
 - c) "Make sure your ready in God's way, not in your own!"
 - d) "What will you do with Jesus?" or "What have you done with Jesus?"
 - e) "So then are you rejecting Jesus? Don't reject Jesus, I urge you!"
 - 3) Jesus also said "Do not throw pearls before swine," Mt. 7:6. This may be a reminder not to lose one's time with people who are closed, hardened and antagonistic to the Gospel.⁴⁴
- d. After sharing the Gospel:
- 1) Be sensitive to the continued spiritual needs of the closed person (I Pe. 3:15).
 - 2) Be transparent with this person, and open to their needs.
 - 3) Do not seek to avoid the closed person, Pr. 24:1.
 - 4) Love your closed neighbor, Mt. 22:39 (cf. Pr. 14:21; Mt. 5:43-47)
 - 5) Don't make yourself a nuisance to your closed neighbor, Pr. 25:17
 - 6) **Pray** for this person and wait for the Holy Spirit to open up the door for the Gospel.
- e. Illustration: Jack in Canadian town.

3. The Non-Committal Person:

Introduction: No decision is the greatest sin one can commit, for it is sin against the Holy Spirit (Lk. 12:10, Heb. 10:26-27), and it is disobeying God's greatest command (Mt. 22:36-38).

- a. Some biblical examples of non-committal people:
- 1) Individuals:
 - a) Rich Young Ruler, Matt. 19:16-26, Mark 10:17-22, Luke 18:18-30
 - b) Pilate, Matt. 26:11-26, Mark 15:1-15, Luke 23:1-7, 13-25, John 18:33-19:16
 - c) Felix and Drussila, Acts 24:24-25
 - d) Agrippa, Bernice and Festus, Acts 25:23-26:32

⁴⁴ Chapter 6, section I.F., "When Do You Shake the Dust Off Your Feet?" discusses the topic in detail.

- 2) Groups:
 - a) Multitude, John 6:66; multitudes, Matt. 20:9 >> Matt. 27:22-23
 - b) Many, John 12:14, 24-26, 42
- b. Reasons for the non-committal person:
 - 1) “Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people,” Dt. 4:6
 - 2) “Thine enemies will give feigned obedience to Thee,” Ps. 66:3
 - 3) “Those who hate the Lord would pretend obedience to Him,” Ps. 81:15
- c. No decision is a decision against Christ:
 - 1) Mt. 12:30, “He who is not with Me is against Me; and he who does not gather with Me scatters.” (cf. Lk. 11:23)
 - 2) Lk. 16:13, “No servant can serve two masters.”
- d. A choice must be made:
 - 1) Deut. 30:15-19, v. 19, “So **choose life** in order that you may live, you and your descendants.”
 - 2) Ez. 18:32, “ ‘For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone who dies,’ declares the Lord God, ‘Therefore, **repent and live.**’”
 - 3) Luke 9:59, “And He said to another, ‘**Follow Me.**’”
 - 4) Jn. 14:11, “**Believe Me** that I am in the Father, and the Father in Me; otherwise believe on account of the works themselves.”
 - 5) Heb. 4:2, “For indeed we had good news preached to us, just as they also; but the word they heard did not profit them, because it was not **united by faith** in those who heard.”
 - 6) Heb. 11:6, “Without **faith** it is impossible to please Him”
- e. The urgency of making a decision for Jesus:
 - 1) II Cor. 6:2, “behold, **now** is ‘the acceptable time,’ behold, **now** is ‘the day of salvation.’”
 - 2) Heb. 3:7-8 (Ps. 95:7-8), “**Today** if you hear His voice, do not harden your heart”
- f. Something to keep him thinking: “I hope that you don’t die tonight!”

4. **The Messenger of Satan:**

Introduction: A group that I overlooked until I counseled a student recently, and considered my ministry and the Book of Acts anew!

- a. Satan seems to send his mercenaries to attack at key junctures in the propagation of the Gospel:
 - 1) Ananias and Sapphira, Acts 5:1-11
 - 2) Simon the sorcerer, Acts 8:9-24
 - 3) Bar-Jesus or Elymas the magician, Acts 13:6-12
 - 4) The priest of Zeus, Acts 14:8-18
 - 5) Slave-girl with a spirit of divination, Acts 16:16-24
 - 6) Another not examined is: Demetrius the silversmith, Acts 19:24-41
- b. Their reception of the Gospel:
 - 1) Ananias and Sapphira seemed to be members of the church in Jerusalem, and were giving to the work of the ministry, Acts 5:1-2
 - 2) Simon the sorcerer seemed to believe, was baptized, and continued on with Philip, Acts 8:13, although (a) his “heart was not right before God,” Acts 8:21, (b) his desire for the Holy Spirit showed that he was caught “in the gall of

- bitterness and in the bondage of iniquity,” Acts 8:23, and (c) he despised the admonition of Peter by getting in the last word, Acts 8:24.
- 3) Elymas the magician opposed Barnabas and Saul, and sought to turn the proconsul away from the faith, Acts 13:8
 - 4) The priest of Zeus turned the healing into a reason to worship his god in his way, Acts 14:13
 - 5) The slave-girl must have heard the message, for her statement concerning Paul and his ministry was correct: “These men are bond-servants of the Most High God, who are proclaiming to you the way of salvation,” Acts 16:17
- c. How they were dealt with:
- 1) Ananias and Sapphira were dealt with directly by Peter, and they died, Acts 5:3-10
 - 2) Peter called Simon the sorcerer directly by confronting him, Acts 8:20-23
 - 3) Paul spoke very forthrightly to Elymas the magician, even calling down blindness on him, Acts 13:9-11 (this could be said to be a good example of a “power encounter” in the ministry of Paul)
 - 4) Paul was forced to disclaim the reverence of the crowd, and sought to turn the focus to God, Acts 14:14-18
 - 5) Paul waited “many days” before confronting the spirit within the slave-girl, he became greatly annoyed and cast out the spirit, Acts 16:18
- d. Result on the ministry:
- 1) “A great fear came over the whole church, and over all who heard of these things,” Acts 5:11
 - 2) No result is recorded for the result of Elymas the magician, Acts 8:24
 - 3) The proconsul believed and was “amazed at the teaching of the Lord,” Acts 13:12
 - 4) Several results in Acts 14:
 - a) The Jews from Antioch and Iconium allied themselves with the priest of Zeus, the crowds “stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing him to be dead,” Acts 14:19
 - b) Paul returned to the city of Lystra immediately (i.e. he did not flee), Acts 14:20, and Paul returned following his time in Derbe, Acts 14:21
 - c) There were disciples (presumably from that city) that gathered around Paul, Acts 14:20, as well as a church in Lystra, Acts 14:21-23.
 - d) Was this persecution in Lystra, or similar persecution elsewhere why John Mark “deserted them in Pamphylia,” Acts 15:39, thus causing a rift between Paul and Barnabas, Acts 15:36-40, and then allowing the Holy Spirit though Luke to focus on the ministry of Paul, Acts 15:41ff?
 - 5) A series of results ensued after Paul cast the spirit out of the slave-girl:
 - a) Persecution of Paul and Silas: (1) Anger by the profiteers who owned the slave-girl, (2) a riot, (3) Paul and Silas beaten with rods, “when they had stuck them with many blows” and (4) imprisonment and bound in stocks.
 - b) The salvation of the Philippian jailer and his family, Acts 16:27-34
 - c) Apology from the chief magistrates, Acts 16:35-39
 - d) Encouragement of the saints in Lydia’s house, Acts 16:40
- e. Lessons:
- 1) Messengers of Satan come in many types (within the church and outside the church, cf. 2 Cor 11:26), and have varying responses to the Gospel
 - 2) The greatest challenges lead to greater usefulness for Christ:

- a) Paul's name was changed during his encounter with Elymas, Acts 13:9
- b) Paul likely had his "third heaven" experience when left for dead, Acts 14:19-20 (he was stoned only once, 2 Cor 11:25);
- 3) Paul seemed to be harassed by specifically evil persons throughout his ministry.
- 4) "So then, you will know them by their fruits," Matt 7:20
- 5) "Be shrewd as serpents and innocent as doves," Matt 10:16

5. The Spiritual Stagnant:

- a. The reality of spiritual stagnancy:
 - 1) Jer. 12:2, "Thou hast planted them, they have also taken root; they grow, they have even produced fruit. Thou art near their lips but far from their mind."
 - 2) II Tim. 4:3, "For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine"
 - 3) Rev. 2:4, "But I have this against you, that you have left your first love."
 - b. Teaching about dealing with the spiritually stagnant:
 - 1) Ez. 3:20-21, "Again, when a righteous man turns away from his righteousness and commits iniquity, and I place an obstacle before him, he shall die; **since you have not warned him**, he shall die in his sin, and his righteous deeds which he has done shall not be remembered; but **his blood I will require at your hand**. However, **if you have warned** the righteous man that the righteous should not sin, he shall surely live because he took warning; and **you have delivered yourself**."
 - 2) I Thes. 5:14, "And we urge you brethren, **admonish the unruly**, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with all men."
 - 3) Jude 22-23, "And have mercy on some, who are doubting; save others, snatching them out of the fire; and on some have mercy with fear, hating even the garment polluted by the flesh."
 - c. How to deal with the spiritually stagnant:
 - 1) Warn them.
 - 2) Admonish, encourage and help them, with great patience.
 - 3) Have mercy and seek to save them.
 - 4) We will be held guilty for ignoring the stagnant and not warning them!
6. Conclusion:
- a. "He who hears, let him hear; he who refuses, let him refuse," Ezek 3:27
 - b. "Go to the exiles, to the sons of your people, and speak to them, **whether they listen or not**, *Thus says the Lord God.*" Ezek 3:11

C. The Use of Illustrations:

Introduction: Spiritual truths can often be difficult to grasp. This is especially the case if the person is hearing the Gospel concepts for the first time.

Jesus often used illustrations as he taught spiritual truths. This allowed those who heard him to understand the truths He was relating, realizing that at times the illustrations hid the meaning from the people (cf. Matt. 13:10-17).

Here are some common illustrations which can be of help in different sharing situations. They are not meant to be exhaustive, but rather illustrative of what can

be taught effectively with illustrations. The illustrations have been categorized by the spiritual truth which they are meant to illustrate.⁴⁵

1. **Sin:**

- a. The Definition of sin:
 - 1) Taking the wrong road to get to a vacation cabin. You can never get to the cabin on the wrong road.
- b. The Progression of sin:
 - 1) Sin is like an icicle which forms on a gutter. When it gradually gets too big, the gutter will come down.
 - 2) Sin is like worms attacking a tree. Things look fine from the outside until a strong wind comes and the tree falls. Then all the rot on the inside is made evident. The tree was weakened from within.
- c. The Cords of Sin:
 - 1) Sin is like a frog who jumps into a saucepan when it is cold. He feels comfortable and doesn't jump out even when the temperature of the water goes up. Eventually he boils to death, but he never knows it until it is too late. This is like the cords of sin. Proverbs 5:22-23.
 - 2) Sin is like a mouse that sees a beautiful cat. The mouse is attracted to the beautiful fur on the cat until the moment he comes too close. The cat pounces, and it is too late.
 - 3) Sin is like a deep chasm which gives off heat and warmth. The sinner keeps creeping closer, never getting enough heat. Then he gets too close and falls into the pit.

2. **The Justice of God:**

- a. A man kills ten people. He then flees to the mountain. Ten years later he comes back to civilization and gets caught. A good friend is his judge. Would it be right for the good friend to release the killer? He is sentenced to 1,000 strikes with a lash.
- b. In the banking industry, if a person was to withdraw more money than he had in his account he is penalized for his error. It is a cause and effect relationship. So also with the justice of God. God requires perfection. And because man has sinned against God, he does not arrive at the perfection that God requires. He is left owing to God. God must see that the debt is paid.

3. **Spiritual Need:**

- a. A man buys a '57 Corvette. But it has no battery. Let's say that he cannot buy a battery. Will that car run? No it needs a battery. Similarly, we need the

4. **Repentance:**

- a. The road to the vacation cabin illustration. If a left turn has been taken instead of a right turn along the road somewhere. The only way to get to the cabin is make a 180o turn and head back and find the right way. Even so, sin is going down the wrong path. The sinful lifestyle must be turned from to walk in righteousness.

⁴⁵ D. James Kennedy has good illustrative material for use in personal evangelism in *Evangelism Explosion* (Wheaton, IL; Tyndale House Publishers, 1977) on pages 105-110. There are also many illustration books available. However, the best illustrations are those taken from the life of the illustrator.

4. The Sacrifice for Sin:

- a. The hand illustration: The Bible or another object is held in the right hand to show the weight of man's sin. Then the object is transferred to the other hand, showing that Jesus bore the weight of man's sin. This is good to illustrate Isaiah 53:5-6 and/or II Corinthians 5:21 (also Col. 1:21-22).
- b. A take-off on the killer of ten men illustration. The killer has another friend who decides to take the penalty of the 1,000 lashes for him. This other friend does so and dies in the process. Now when the killer stands before the judge, his record is clean, for the penalty has been paid.
- c. Father as judge illustration: A person who is guilty of a crime comes before the court. The penalty is declared by the judge. Then the judge takes off his robe, and the guilty person sees that it is his/her father. He comes around the bench and asks to take the penalty for the person. That's what Jesus did for us!

5. Contra Self-justification:

- a. Swimming to Hawaii illustration: No matter how good a swimmer is, no one can swim from California to Hawaii. I may get 500 feet. An ironman may swim five miles. But no one can make it all the way to Hawaii. God demands perfection. No one can claim a perfect life, other than Jesus. That's why we need His death to speak for us.

6. Free Choice:

- a. The robot does not have free choice. It must do what it is programmed to do. Man, however, can decide to do what he wants. Man has free choice.

7. Faith:

- a. The tightrope walker's challenge. A tightrope walker successfully crosses a tightrope across the Niagara Falls pushing a wheel barrel. Upon his return, he asks the crowd if they feel that he is able to cross with the wheel barrel full of rocks. The crowd agrees that he can do this, and he does. Then he asks if they feel he can take a person across in the wheel barrel. They wholeheartedly agree. No one is willing to accept the challenge. They don't have faith when their life is at stake.
- b. The chair illustration. A person may believe that a chair will hold him. But he doesn't put this belief into practice until he actually sits in the chair.

Conclusion: 1 Thessalonians 5:14