



Can you hear me now?

Evangelism for the 21st Century world

by Mathew Block

Have you seen the TV ads for a cell phone company with the catch phrase: “Can you hear me now?” In each commercial a man wanders in various locations talking on his cell-phone. Whenever he asks, “Can you hear me now?” the answer is always the same: Yes. The point is clear: “We’ve got great cell-coverage; if you have something to say to a friend, using our cell-company will ensure your friend gets the message.”

In some ways evangelism is like these ads. We have an amazing message—the Good News of salvation in Jesus Christ—and we want to send out that message. But it is not enough to simply shout it at the top of our lungs; we first have to make sure someone is *receiving* the message. For it is in hearing the message of grace that people receive faith in the first place. “How are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard?” St. Paul asks before answering himself, “Faith comes by hearing” (Romans 10:14,17 ESV). For Christians then, the question “Can you hear me now?” has eternal consequences.

The ads highlight a common problem when communicating via cell-phone: if you go out of the service area, your call can “drop” and end unexpectedly. In the same way, problems can arise when we attempt to share our faith with the world around us.

Consider the following story: Andrew is having a conversation with his co-worker Chelsea one day when God grants him an opportunity to share the Gospel.

“What is Christianity really all about?” Chelsea asks. Andrew responds matter-of-factly, “Well, to put it in a nutshell, people are separated from God because of sin. Yet God in grace has justified us through the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ. He is our propitiation, and through his death and resurrection he imputes righteousness to us.”

Chelsea is quiet for a few seconds. “Oh,” she says simply. A few more seconds pass and then she speaks again. “Well, I guess I better get back to working on that report...” The conversation ends and Andrew is left wondering what went wrong.

While Andrew and Chelsea are both speaking English, it might be fair to say they are not really speaking the same language. Even though Andrew gets the Gospel message basically right, he uses so much jargon that Chelsea has no idea what he is talking about. She is listening to the words coming out of his mouth, but not really *hearing* what he is saying. The fact is, when we want to communicate anything to anyone, it is not only important *what* we say; it is also important *how* we say it.

Our own language

Over the centuries, the Church has built up a lot of specialized vocabulary to talk about Christianity. In deep

theological discussions we might pull out exotic-sounding words like “homooousios” and “antinomianism.” In day-to-day discussions of our faith we are more likely to rely on words like “justification” and “sacrament.” But if we are completely honest with ourselves, we have to admit that many of us in the pews do not really understand the meaning of “day-to-day” words! If such jargon can be hard for Christians to grasp, imagine how much more confusing it can be for our increasingly post-Christian society.

For people outside the church’s walls, even words like “sin” and “grace” have become foreign or at least difficult to understand. When we rely too heavily on such Christian jargon, or “church-ese” as it is sometimes called, we are in great danger of obscuring the Gospel of Christ. And while the story of salvation is profound, it surely need not be confusing.

Historical precedent

For effective evangelism, we need to speak the language of our audience. And this assertion is not based on human invention; it is not part of some “Nine Secret Tips for Successful Evangelism” course. Instead, we speak the language of our audience because God has revealed that as *His* method.

In the Book of Acts, we read that shortly after Christ’s ascension into heaven, the Holy Spirit came upon the apostles during the festival of Pentecost. As the Holy Spirit filled them, they “began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance” (Acts 2:4). The story continues:

Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven. And at this sound the multitude came together, and they were bewildered, because each one was hearing them speak in his own language. And they were amazed and astonished, saying, ‘Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language?... We hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God’ (Acts 2:5-8, 11 ESV).

In this event, God demonstrates powerfully that He is the God of the entire world and not just the Israelites. Every tribe and every people belong to Him. He understands and speaks every language. Unlike in Islam where believers are required to learn Arabic to read the Qu’ran and make required daily prayers, the True God meets people where they are. At Pentecost, God spoke to every person in her or his own language. He does the same today.

Here God reveals His desire that the Church’s witness to the world be intelligible to all. It is not enough to merely proclaim the Gospel; the Gospel must be proclaimed in

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words everyday people can understand. The authorship of the Bible is itself symbolic of that commitment. The New Testament, for example, is not written in high literary Greek. Its authors do not use elite dialects based on “Homeric Greek” or “Attic Greek”—the styles used by such famous men as Homer, Plato, Aristotle, and Euripides. Instead, they write in what is called “koine Greek.” We might call it “street Greek”—the language of the common people. In the writing of the New Testament, God makes clear He is not interested in just speaking to the elites of the Roman Empire; His message was and is Good News for all people. And all people must be able to understand it.

When Luther began his translation of the Bible into German, he came to the same conclusion: the Scriptures should not be made so complicated that only academics and clergy could understand them. For centuries that was the practice of the church and it had led to widespread corruption and misunderstanding of the Gospel. In *On Translating: An Open Letter*, Luther writes that the way in which the Word of God is presented must be easily understood by everyone in society. Discussing how one should translate, he writes:

We must inquire about this of the mother in the home, the children on the street, the common man in the marketplace. We must be guided by their language, the way they speak, and do our translating accordingly. That way they will understand it and recognize that we are speaking German to them.

That commitment to making Scripture accessible to all people has been instrumental in bringing people to faith and allowing the Church to grow. What began as a German-language project quickly spread across Europe as other Christians followed Luther’s example. Translations of the Bible began appearing in other languages: English, Dutch, French, Polish and so forth. Centuries later that project continues today as groups like Lutheran Bible Translators and Wycliffe Bible Translators work diligently to produce Scripture translations for the millions who have yet to hear the Gospel of Jesus Christ in their own language.

Home-grown problem

Yet the problem of communicating the Gospel clearly is not restricted to overseas missions. It is not just a problem for people translating the Scripture into new languages. Instead, it is a concern for the Church at all times and in all places. As society around us changes, the language we use to communicate with that society must also change. Not so long ago Lutheran congregations in North America conducted services in German—and some still do. As time went on, however, it became clear that change was necessary. English had fast become the

dominant language of communication outside the church. If Lutherans were to proclaim the message of Christ to the world around them, they would need to speak the same language the world spoke.

The transition to English was difficult for some—an older member of my congregation recalls the battle in his church on the issue. Those against the language change cried, “Our God is German!” But the fact is our God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—is God of the entire world—of all peoples, all tongues, and all dialects. He is the God of the boy speaking Zulu on the South African coast. He is the God of the senior citizen speaking traditional Newfoundland English in Eastern Canada. And He is the God of the young mother speaking Mandarin in Taiwan or Vancouver.

Today, we face a dilemma similar to that of our German forebears. North American culture has shifted dramatically. As our society moves from a Christian to a post-Christendom context, our language is changing. To the world around us, our jargon is becoming just that—jargon. The question for us remains what we will do about it? Certainly these words still have their place within the Church, in the education and discipleship of believers; but perhaps a new language is required on the evangelical front lines. Perhaps it is time we begin translating the Good News of Jesus Christ anew for our 21st century audience—not changing the meaning of the message, but nevertheless expressing it in new words.

May God grant us the ability to communicate the Gospel of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ clearly to our neighbours, so that when God in mercy asks them, “Can you hear Me now?” they can answer, “Yes.”

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We’re always looking for news

Here are some tips for submitting news items to the district news sections of *The Canadian Lutheran*.

- Designate a reporter to write about your event and photographer to take pictures.
- In your story include the five Ws: who, what, where, when and why; also how.
- Keep the story short (no more than 250 words).
- Use quotes from those involved
- Send your congregation or school stories and reports to your district editor.

Photos

- Avoid lines of people; look for action during the event.
- Take digital photos at the LARGEST size and e-mail to your district editor
- Send processed photos to your district editor with the story; we will return them.
- Identify those in the photo and describe the action
- We cannot publish digital photos printed on a home printer or embedded in a Word file.