

Over the last couple of years there has been a fair bit of talk about the six degrees of separation. Now basically this is a theory that says that everyone in the world is connected to every other person in the world by a chain of no more than six people. That means, for example, there is a connection between me and the President of the United States. I know someone, who knows someone else, who knows someone, who knows someone else, who knows the President of the United States.

And it works, you just have to find the connections. For example, I went to college a few years back with a guy called Andrew, who went and worked in an Anglican Church in Texas. His boss knows another minister who knows Chuck Colson, a guy who is one of the advisors to the new President of the United States, Barak Obama.

But apparently this theory works for all people and so in the same way with a bit of work we could find out how you are connected to a nomadic herdsman in Afghanistan! For the theory states that there are six degrees of separation for all humans. But when it comes to getting in touch with God, there is only one degree of separation. We can all have a personal relationship with God. One on one. That's how we were made, as one of God's children. But the Bible also says at present there is a huge gulf of separation between each one of us and God. It is like *we* are on one side of a huge chasm, and **God** is on the other side. And the thing that separates us from him is our **sins**.

So what is going to bridge that gap? How are we going to get from where we are, to where God is? Well the Apostle Paul has the answer for us this evening. Remember a couple of weeks ago he was going to Damascus and he met with the risen Jesus? Remember that he was the one who was called by God to show people how they could become friends again with him? Remember he is the one who is making a difference to the world, who last week changed the world of Lydia, the prisoners, the jailor by reconnecting them with their God?

You see Paul has been appointed God's apostle, his spokesman, his roving ambassador and he is travelling around Asia and Europe and now he has arrived in Athens, not in time for the Olympics, but so he could tell people how to come back to God. And in chapter 17, we hear the Apostle Paul doing just that, doing some evangelism. And so it would be good for us to eavesdrop to hear what he says and how he says it.

So how do we bridge the gap between us and God? How can we deal with our sin? So what does Paul say about that? Well Paul starts where the Athenians are. He starts talking to them about religion. And whether **religion** will get us to God?

He notes that the audience are very religious. In fact in Athens there were altars and religions everywhere. One historian said rather tongue in cheek it was easier to find a god than a person in ancient Athens. So surely if you are religious, if you pray to God, if you go to the Temple or to Church or Youth Group regularly, if you wear a cross around your neck, if you have a Buddha in the corner of your room, if you use lots of religious

sounding words, then surely that will get you to God, wont it?

Now many people today believe that. They may not believe in formal religion in going to Church, in reading the Bible, but most will turn to a minister when they die, a lot of young couples want their kids baptised. When they are desperate they will pray. They do believe in God, there just not sure what that God is like. And so because all religions lead to God, (well don't they?) they take bits from this religion, bits from that religion and a bit from what they want to believe.

So will religion get us to God? No, Paul says it won't. He says if you build an idol, if you bow down to an image that is false then that is not going to get us anywhere. In fact there is only one way religion can get us to God and that is, and look with me at verse 31, "*For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead.*"

Not any old way will get us to God it is only via the one that God himself has appointed. The one who died and on the third day came back to life. Being religious then doesn't get us to God, no matter how sincere we are.

Well if religion can't do it, maybe we have to do something to be good enough for God? Maybe our *actions* can breach the gap? Maybe if we find out what God needs and give it to him? Maybe if we find out what pleases him and do it for him? Maybe if the way to a man's heart is through his stomach, then similarly we can find a way to God's heart, through some sort of action on our behalf?

Once again Paul says we have struck out. God doesn't need anything that we have! God is not served by human hands. He doesn't need your money, as the psalmist says he owns the cattle on a thousand hills. He doesn't need your worship either. Don't think that if you come tonight you get on God's good side for the next week. He doesn't need your prayers to know what's going on. He controls the world, he knows what is going on better than you do. He made the world, including yourself so there is nothing that you can give him.

So our actions are never going to bridge that gap. Well what if we just rest on *who we are*. We are God's children, he has invested stuff into us, surely like a good dad, he wont turn any of us away. Surely we will all get to heaven, whether we have ignored him in the past or searched after him. It doesn't matter, because we are his creatures, he will look after us in the end, won't he?

I'm sorry. Paul says in the past he has overlooked such ignorance but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. And he will come back and judge us based on our view of Jesus, and on his death and his resurrection. You see God's solution to the problem of our sin, is to send *J-e-s-u-s*. He is the one who never committed a sin. He was the one who died in our place. He is the one who takes the rap from all our wrongdoings. Jesus then is *the bridge* that gets rid of the separation between us and God.

Friends if we want to come back to God, we will not get there through religion or through

our actions or through who we are, we will only get there through Jesus Christ. And it's all a matter of our ABC. **Accept** that you are a sinner. **Believe** that Jesus died for your sin. **Commit** yourself to him and to his ways only. Which means turning, repenting from your old ways and following Jesus from now on.

Now if you have been around Churches long enough, you will know what I have done. I have noticed in the apostle Paul, a gospel presentation that is similar to the tract, Bridge to Life. It's a tract I like a lot and if I have the chance I use it. For I think everyone should have in their mind a gospel outline. It doesn't have to be bridge to life, it can be Two Ways to Live, Four Spiritual Laws or Christianity a pocket guide. Some way of taking a non believer through a simple gospel outline. And if it is catchy, or has illustrations or links in with a tract, then after the conversation that person, knows a little bit more about how to no longer be separated from God.

Our job, in a way, it to build a bridge for them to God. A bridge that they can walk to God. That's our job. God's job is to convince them to walk on over that bridge. To reconcile them back to their loving heavenly Father.

It was the famous writer Earnest Hemmingway who once wrote a short story called "The Capital of the World". And it Hemmingway tells the story of a Spanish father and his teenage son. The relationship between the Father and the Son became strained and eventually snapped. So much so, that the son, whose name was Paco, which is a very common Spanish name, rebelled and ran away. The father wanted him back and so tried long and hard to find Paco but everywhere he looked he couldn't trace his son.

As a last resort the exhausted father placed an ad in a Madrid newspaper, hoping that the son would see the ad and respond to it. The ad simply read..."Dear Paco Please meet me in the front of the newspaper office at noon. All is forgiven. Love Father." As Hemmingway tells the story, the next day at noon, in front of the newspaper office were 800 Paco's, all seeking forgiveness from their fathers.

I wonder, how many Paco's are there here this evening? And how many at school, at work, in our neighbourhood? That need forgiveness from their heavenly Father. That need to know the good news about Jesus. That desire to have their relationship with God fixed up but are trying to do it through religion, through some good actions or maybe even through who they are. We like the apostle Paul are called to make sure people know how they can no longer be separated from God.

But it is more than just words, isn't it? So how does Paul try and reach the people in Athens? And are there any pointers we can learn about from him in how to reach the people of our town? Well let's start from the beginning. Paul arrives in Athens and we see that in verse 16 that he has to wait for his travelling companions Paul and Silas. And so as he waits, he walks around the city. And as he looks at the beautiful architecture, the great temples, as he rubs shoulders with everyday people he becomes greatly distressed. And here is our first point. You won't want to share the good news with others unless you are moved to, unless you are distressed.

Paul's *motivation*(1) was that he was greatly *distressed* (v16) because these people were ignorant of the truth. They needed to be reconnected with God and this fact brought him to tears. And to be honest that's where our problems begin. For rarely are we distressed about the state of our family's souls, whether our friends are going to hell or not. We often get more excited about a party coming up, or about the results of a cricket game than if someone is out of step with God or not. So if we are going to be like the apostle Paul and share the good news, our world and its ways need to distress us, for only that will motivate us.

So Paul is distressed but he doesn't wait for people to come to him, *he goes to them* - v.17 (2). He goes to the synagogue and reasons and debates and tries to persuade them. And he goes to the market place and talks with the people there as well. In other words he goes on to their turf. And by doing that he is given a chance to appear at the next Council meeting to discuss his views on God.

If we are going to make a difference in our world, not only do we need to be distressed about the state of people's souls, we need to go onto other people's turf. It doesn't mean we have to be obnoxious or anything, but when people are discussing issues and concepts and religion, we need to take a deep breath, say a short prayer and do our best to join in. Just like Paul did.

But we need to do this *respectfully* (3). Notice how Paul starts his speech in Athens. In *verse 22* "Men of Athens, I see that in every way you are very religious." He doesn't say to them, look guys you are all wrong and luckily for you I can tell you the truth! He doesn't say you are all sinners and here I have a solution to your sin. He isn't rude or boastful or arrogant or conceited, he humbly finds a point of contact in which he can agree with them and then he uses this as a base to build a bridge for them to God.

So he finds a **point of contact** (4). For Paul it was that he was walking around the streets and he found an altar to an unknown God and he says you worship a god whom you don't know, but I'm able to tell you a little bit about this unknown God. You see how he does it? He starts where they are, he acknowledges their desire to know God and he taps into this as a starting point to tell them about Jesus and the resurrection. He has looked around until he has found something in common with them, something he could use to open a conversation, something that he can *build a bridge for them to God* (5)

If we are going to be like the Apostle Paul, we need to find a point of contact with the people we know and use that as a bridge to move them slowly towards God. If Paul were speaking today in Terranora he might say, "As I walked around, I heard everyone talking about the bushfires in Victoria and how people have lost everything in just a couple of hours when the fires came hurtling through. So why do people put their trust in things that can disappear in an instant? And is there anything of importance that can survive a bushfire that is backed by 100 kilometre winds?"

Or Paul might say, "As I watched the DVD the Dark Knight recently, it seemed that in

the battle between good and bad, the goodies were tempted to fight evil the wrong way. If we are going to fight evil does it matter how we do it, or does the end justify the means?

You see what Paul is doing, he is using every day events, every day activities as a basis of talking to people about their relationship with God. He is finding a common ground, not so that he can agree with people, but so they can listen, work out what they think, what they believe and so eventually challenge them toward eternal life.

Friends, this is our challenge as well. I don't claim to be an expert on this, in fact, my natural shyness often stops me from doing this. But this is something we all have to work at. We need to find a gospel outline that works for us. We have to be motivated by the fact that people are lost, they are separated from and only Jesus will bring them back. And then we have to find a way of getting onto their turf of respectfully finding a point of contact, building a bridge for them to go and praying that God, in his good time, will lead them back to himself.

I was reading about some research done recently about why we don't do this, why we don't share our faith. Listen to what Christian researcher George Barna found out "In asking Christians about their witnessing activities, we have found that nine out of ten individuals who attempt to explain their beliefs and theology to other people come away from those experiences feeling as if they have failed . . . The reality of human behavior is that most people avoid those activities in which they perceive themselves to be failures. As creatures seeking pleasure and comfort, we emphasize those dimensions and activities in which we are most capable and secure. Thus, despite the divine command to spread the Word, many Christians redirect their energies into areas of spiritual activity that are more satisfying and in which they are more likely to achieve success.

Friends it is not up to us, God is the one that opens people's hearts. Our job is to build a bridge, it is up to god whether someone crosses that bridge or not.

midweekchurch planning meeting

1. Challenge: Question 1 - Reformmission?
2. Past: How are we going at present?
3. People: Are there people we need to follow up with at present?
4. Projections
 - New leadership team
 - Easter
 - School Holidays
 - Family Club 14.3
 - The Challenge – Becoming Christians – Growing as Christians.