

Presenting the Gospel to Young People (Dattoli/Hutchcraft)

In 1964-5 the internationally known youth leader, Ron Hutchcraft, was just beginning his decades-long ministry. I happened to be a student of his in that year. He has written a book, *The Battle for a Generation*, in which he suggests a way to present the gospel to teens that reach them, that scratches them where they itch. I always liked it. Here's my summary of it. I think it can help youth leaders present the gospel effectively, especially in a group setting of young people.

PRESENTATION OUTLINE

- Most of us are looking for something that seems missing, but we're not sure of what it is.
- Some of us have a sense that what we're missing is a significant relationship with someone else.
- Many of us feel that we are somehow incomplete in and of ourselves without that relationship.
- We may have a deep fear of being found out that we are not complete as we are.
- Some of us develop a social anxiety that causes us great pain, embarrassment, and paralyzes us at times.
- Especially when we are young these feelings can be pretty common and sometimes debilitating.
- Sometimes when we 'fall in love' those bad feelings can be overcome by good feelings of acceptance, etc.
- Sometimes when we are too needy, and we've finally found that 'one person' who accepts and understands us, we tend to form attachments that are very hard to break, even in situations where the other person ends up hurting us, or taking advantage of us. Most of us have probably hung onto relationships that we should have probably ended. Healthy relationships don't have to have pain and drama.
- Sometimes we call these relationships 'codependent.' It's not the ideal of 2 independent people, each complete in themselves, enjoying a relationship where they can give, but their happiness is not dependent on receiving...because sometimes any partner will have times they are unable to give for one reason or another. That's why marriage vows often include the phrase 'for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health.'
- Sometimes 2 needy people end up marrying, and only after the wedding discover that the other person cannot really meet their deepest needs. That is probably pretty common, and it usually results in a very sad marriage or a divorce.

Here's what you need to understand:

- You do have a deep need for a good relationship. You were designed that way, so it's normal.
- But the reality of life is that no other human person is designed to meet those needs. In their struggle to have their own needs met, they cannot fully focus on meeting your needs.
- But there is someone who can meet those needs, and desires to have a meaningful relationship with you.
- When you think about it, it may not surprise you that that person is your creator.
- God created people, including you, to have deep, satisfying, loving relationships with.
- THIS IS the reason you have sense of emptiness and longing that you have not been able to fill, if you haven't yet begun a honest, truthful relationship with God.
- Each of your camp counselors have discovered this, and they have come here this week to share this truth with you, a truth that they have experienced – that only through a relationship with God can a person's deepest longings be met.
- When you have these needs met, your relationships with other people can be healthier, and you can take pleasure in giving your love to another without obligating them to respond, until they are healthy enough themselves to give without expecting to be repaid.
- The philosopher Blaise Pascal, as an observer of mankind, once said "All men seek happiness. There are no exceptions. However different the means they may employ, they all strive towards this goal...There is a God-shaped vacuum in the heart of each man which cannot be satisfied by any created thing but only by God the Creator, made known through Jesus Christ."

...That challenge drives us to find the ways that will express the Jesus-message most clearly, most concisely, and most completely. The challenge begins with our vocabulary. Many wonderful Bible words, like “sin,” “Savior,” “believe,” and “born again,” are either meaningless to today’s teenagers or they have the wrong meaning. “Repent,” “accept Christ,” and “become a Christian” are also examples of Christian words that do not communicate to non-Christian teenagers. If we cannot explain the Gospel and words like these in nonreligious language, the young people we are trying to rescue may never get past our “Christianese.”

Even our Christian kids are, at least in part, products of a pagan youth culture. We are missionaries to a post-Christian youth culture. We have the same challenge any missionary to a pagan culture has—how do we communicate the message of Jesus in the language of the “native”? It’s OK to use those Christian words if you explain them. Sadly, in many cases with young people, it is not our message that’s being rejected, it’s our vocabulary. We have obscured this life-changing, life-saving Gospel in language only we understand.

As I speak to young people, I’m always asking myself, “How can I say this and illustrate it in a way that they will understand without discounting the full biblical meaning of it?” We want to modify the package without modifying the product. What we need is a way to present the Gospel that will plug right in to where kids are.

How can we effectively communicate the Gospel? How do we get across “Jesus Christ and Him crucified” in a way that will be understood by a post-Christian young person?

We need to begin with what matters most to teenagers today—relationships. It is effective to present the Gospel as a relationship. Every teenager understands, values, and longs for relationships. All young people know there’s a relationship missing—someone who is supposed to be there, but isn’t. They think it’s a boyfriend, girlfriend, a best friend, a group of friends, a close family, someone to get married to, a baby. But no earth-person can fill the hole in their hearts. It’s God that they are missing.

As messengers of Jesus’ love, we have a Gospel that is all about life’s most important relationship. When you talk about a love relationship, you are talking about something young people already care about. You are starting with a vacuum that they already sense. Second Corinthians 5:19-20 sums up the Gospel in one word—reconciliation. It says that we are messengers of a Gospel of reconciliation. Reconciliation is a relationship word. It is about a relationship that is broken and needs to be fixed. That is where the Gospel of Jesus Christ begins. This Gospel that is all about a relationship is not just an attempt to be culturally relevant—it is biblically accurate too.

Our life-saving message will point the way to ultimate relationship—in words a lost teenager can understand.

NO MORE HOLE IN YOUR HEART

The Relationship Gospel can best be presented in terms of four important discoveries about life’s most important relationship. These are the ingredients that need to be included in a message to present to young people.

► It’s a Relationship You’re Supposed to Have

Every young person knows that “someone’s missing” feeling. Our Creator explains who is missing in Colossians 1:16—and tells us in six words why we are on this planet. “All things were [here are the six words] *created by Him and for Him*” (italics added). The verse is about Jesus Christ. So God says we were created by Jesus and for

Jesus—and you are going to have a hole in your heart until you have Jesus. The missing Person is the One we were made by and made for. But why is He missing?

► It's a Relationship You Don't Have

In God's words, "Your iniquities have separated you from your God" (Isaiah 59:2). Whatever this "sin" thing is, it has separated us from the One we need.

To understand sin, look at the middle letter, because the letter "i" is the essence of the problem of sin. Basically, I was created to function correctly only as I submit and allow God to run things. Instead I have said, "God, You run the universe. I will run me, thank You."

In other words, I was created to live for Him; I have chosen to live for me. I was put here to live God's way. Instead, I'm living my way, and that's what sin is. Sin is thousands of "I'll-be-God" decisions in everyday situations. Lying in spite of the fact God says to tell the truth. Disobeying parents when God's way is to honor them. Having sex before marriage instead of following God's directions to save it.

So that word "I" is our problem. We can picture the earth revolving around the sun. As long as the earth is revolving around the sun, we have warmth, color, seasons, and life. But what if the earth says, "Excuse me, but I'm tired of revolving around the sun"? The earth goes over to the side and says, "I have found a nice orbit of my own. Thank you." Eventually, all warmth, all color, all seasons, and all life will cease. Why? Because the earth was created to revolve around the sun. Being in its own orbit leads to death. That's exactly what the Bible says about us. We were created to revolve around God. We have instead gone off on our own orbit and revolved around ourselves. And "the wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23)—death as in being cut off from God, the One we were made by and made for.

Earlier we saw that our message should start with their need. That need may be loneliness or inability to cope with pressure. Or possibly depression, bad relationships, fear of the future. Whatever that need is, it is ultimately traceable to the fact they are missing the relationship they were meant to have to fill the loneliness, cope with the pressure, take away the fear of death, and handle life.

Now you can explain that the reason for the symptom is the cancer of sin. They are experiencing the missingness of God—"the wages of sin." If we die with that sin-wall still there, we will spend forever without God. That is what the Bible calls hell. But that is not what God wants. He created us to have this relationship with Him, now and forever. Yes, we are supposed to have this most important relationship. But we do not have it because of our sin, the running of lives God was supposed to run. Which leads to the good news.

► It's a Relationship You Can Have

First Peter 3:18 says, "Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God." If I were discussing this with a lost teenager, I might define righteous, then ask, "Now, who's the righteous? Who's the one who's got nothing wrong with Him in this story? Jesus. OK. Who's the unrighteous? Yeah, you and me. OK. Him for me." The result of Jesus dying, Him for us, is to "bring us to God." We are separated from Him, but something about Christ dying brings us to God. And that is where we need to be—where we were created to be. Often I have used a simple example to explain to a teenager what Jesus did on the cross. You are in debt. Let's say you (we'll use the name Julie) owe \$10,000 to the bank, and the banker calls you in and says, "Julie, it's your day to pay your bill."

You say, "OK, I have two quarters here. How can I pay?"

The banker says, "Nice try. I said \$10,000, and you pay today."

Suddenly a stranger arrives on the scene and says, “Mr. Banker, I don’t owe this bank anything. If you’ll check, I don’t have any bill here. I would like to pay Julie’s bill for her.”

The banker says, “Well, wait a minute. It’s her debt and you want to pay it with your money?”

“Yes,” says the stranger.

The banker says, “Well, Julie, that would be up to you. You decide. It’s your bill. Do you want to pay it yourself, or would you like this man to pay it?”

You say, “Well, sir, I don’t understand why you’re doing this, but thank you very much.” You allow the man the privilege of paying the bill.

You will not get a call from the banker tomorrow saying, “What about the \$10,000, Julie?” You have a fresh start with the bank. Even though it was your bill, someone paid it.

I love to tell a young person, “That’s exactly what happened when Jesus was dying on the cross. That was not just religious martyrdom. That was not some bad thing the Romans did to Him. This was His deliberate plan. It was His expression of love to say, ‘You have a \$10,000 bill with God. From all those times you’ve said, “I’ll be God” or “My way.” That’s why I’m here.’ All of those times added up. We end up with this tremendous gap between us and God. We have a bill that is unpayable. We come up and say, ‘God, I’m a good Catholic. I’m a good Baptist. Did you know I went to catechism? Did you know I’ve been baptized? Did you know I’ve been confirmed?’ God simply says, ‘That’s all counterfeit money. What are you going to do about your payment due?’

“Then Jesus comes along and says, ‘I don’t owe this bank anything. I have no sins of My own that I have to die for.’ And He says, ‘I will pay your bill. You accumulated the debt. I will pay it with My life.’ At that point God turns to you and says, ‘Well, what do you want? Do you want to take His payment, or do you want to try to make your own?’ “

Of course, people are constantly trying to get to God by doing good things—that is why they need to see three of the most radical words in the Bible—“Not by works” (Ephesians 2:9). Most of the places of worship around the world would be empty next week if people understood those words. They’re there because they want to earn salvation. But the One we have to reach says it is not by works. Not by Catholic works or Protestant works or Jewish works. Not by New Age works or Hindu or Muslim works. Not by anybody’s works.

Most people’s concept of dealing with God is like a man who does 80 mph in a 30 mph zone. He is pulled over and a policeman takes him into the judge. The judge says, “Are you guilty?”

The man answers, “Yes, but I don’t have to pay.”

And the judge says, “Oh? Would you like to explain that?”

The speeder’s case is simple—“See, I’ve been through that speed zone a hundred other times and I’ve kept the speed limit every other time. So I don’t have to pay for breaking it. Right?” The judge says, “I don’t care how many times you’ve kept it. What are you going to do about the time you broke it?”

No judge is going to accept good as payment for bad—including the Judge. The penalty still must be paid. No matter how much good you have done, you still have to deal with the times you broke God’s laws. All the good in the world doesn’t change that. You still have sin on your record. A young person needs to know that we are all facing a death penalty for running our own lives- and a death penalty can only be paid by someone dying.

Someone did. God's one and only Son. The amazing center of the Good News is this: I did the sinning; Jesus did the dying.

Because of Him, we can trade in a death penalty we deserve for eternal life we don't deserve.

This story of life's most important relationship is simple but life-changing. It is a relationship you're supposed to have . . . you don't have because of running your own life . . . but you can have because of what Jesus did. The last discovery about this relationship decides whether or not the relationship becomes yours.

► It's a Relationship You Must Choose

We can't have a one-way love affair. Love requires a response. So does the relationship offered by Jesus Christ. Sin was our choice, and having our sin taken away is also our choice.

How do we choose what Jesus did? John 3:16 explains the transaction of trading in death for life. This life-giving relationship belongs to anyone who "believes in Him." Since "believe" is not a word most post-Christian people understand properly, it needs a little illustrating.

Once when I was at the New Jersey shore for a conference, we suddenly saw the lifeguards running along the beach shouting, "Clear the beach. Everyone out of the water." It turned out that three children had gone out too close to the jetty and the current around the jetty had sucked them along. They were being pulled out to sea and were drowning. Lifeguards cleared out the water, and lifeguards were coming from everywhere along the beach. Some of them plunged into the surf in a boat. Other lifeguards ran out and swam as fast as they could.

When they got there, those kids knew what to do. They didn't say, "Thank you for coming," or "I believe you can help me." They grabbed the lifeguards, pinning all their hopes on them. Each one knew, "If he doesn't save me, I'm dead. I'm dying and this guy is my only hope." That's what God means when He says "believe." That is grabbing Jesus like a drowning person would grab a lifeguard and saying, "Jesus, You are my only hope of ever getting rid of this sin problem, ever getting a relationship with God, ever getting to heaven. You are my only hope."

I tell teenagers there are five things they can do with Jesus. One choice is to reject Him and have nothing to do with Him. The number two choice is that they can ignore Him and say, "I'm busy right now, Jesus. I've got my parties, friends, sports, and all, so maybe later. But right now I'm not interested." He's over there and they sort of know He's there, but they keep ignoring Him. A lot of people do that.

The third thing they can do with Jesus is to postpone Him. That's what many kids do. A lot of kids say, "One of these days I think I'll get around to God. That would be a good idea. I picture I'll be about seventy-five. I'll be on life support in a hospital somewhere in intensive care and maybe I'll get around to it then." The fourth thing they can do with Jesus is agree with Him'. "Jesus, I believe all this stuff. I believe You are the Savior, and that You died for my sin. I believe You rose from the dead and that I need You as my Savior."

The last thing they can do is commit themselves to Him, or pin all their hopes on Him.

The first four responses all end up the same place—away from God forever. Among church kids, the most common response to Jesus is to agree with Him. If you wonder why some of your kids are supposed to be alive and seem so dead, it may be because they simply agree with everything Jesus says. They agree with the sin thing, the Savior part, and that a person needs to accept Christ as personal Savior. They have no disagreement with Him. But you don't get saved by a lifeguard by just agreeing with him, "I believe you came to save me."

Wonderful. Did you grab him? If you haven't grabbed him—trusted him completely to rescue you—you're still dying.

There are all kinds of church kids who have agreed with everything Jesus teaches, yet they have never grabbed Him as their Savior. They have never been to the Cross and said, "for me."

Jesus meets us one on one. It's a teenager at the Cross looking at Jesus and saying, "This is for me, isn't it? I take You for me, turning from what's kept me from You and turning to the only one who can bring me to God." As a person turns to Christ, he or she is also turning from whatever is in the other direction. If I want to face the sunset, I have to turn my back on the view to the east. A person cannot face two opposite directions at the same time. That is where the issue of repentance enters into "believing in Him." Acts 3:19 describes this process in these words: "Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out."

As a young person turns to God in saving faith, that person needs to realize he or she is turning from the sin and self-rule that killed God's Son. Instant perfection? No. But realizing that sin keeps us from the Relationship and that Jesus had to give His life to pay for that sin, a person changes his mind about living sinfully. Repentance recognizes that total trust in Jesus is not just an isolated spiritual experience but the beginning of a changed life.

It is our privilege, our eternal responsibility, to help each young person we work with make sure he or she has consciously placed all of his or her trust in Jesus for sin-rescue and a God-relationship. It is all too easy to be surrounded by Christianity and miss Christ.

I know a young woman who was a pastor's daughter. She would tell you that at the age of five, she accepted Christ—although there was no evidence of it in the way she lived. After a while she said, "Hey, I tried it; it doesn't work."

One day I had a meeting with her near her house. I said, "Cindy, would you tell me about this time you accepted Jesus when you were five?" She said, "Yeah. Sure. Our Sunday school teacher had us all come up on the front row, and she said 'If you want to accept Jesus, here's a prayer.' Then she prayed that prayer out loud with us."

I said, "OK, and what exactly did you do then, Cindy?"

She said, "Um. I don't know."

I said, "Cindy, it sounds to me like your Sunday school teacher accepted Christ that day. You told me about a prayer she prayed. I don't hear anything you did with Jesus."

Cindy agreed with it all. She agreed with the Sunday school teacher's prayer. But she never told Jesus, "I'm giving me to You." All those years everyone in the church said, "She's a backslidden Christian." She wasn't a backslidden Christian—she didn't even know Christ.

Youth groups are filled with Cindys who have been around all this "accept Christ stuff," but they have never grabbed Him and pinned all their hopes on Him. They've never been to the cross and said those two words from Galatians 2:20, "for me"—"who gave himself for me." We cannot assume our nice church kids have moved from agreement to commitment. They each deserve an individual opportunity to make sure they have had their own personal walk up the hill—Skull Hill where Jesus is dying on that cross for their sin.

This is life's most important relationship. You are supposed to have it. You don't have it because of sin. You can have it because of what Jesus did! But you must choose in order to have it.