

Christian communication

In I Corinthians Paul sets out his thinking on the subject of 'speaking in tongues' -- one of the more exotic manifestations of the Holy Spirit. Paul insists that, when non-believers are present it would be prudent not to indulge in 'tongues', because the purpose of all communication is to convey information, ideas, values; if the hearer cannot understand, what's the point.

For me this raises an important and more general point. What is the purpose of our Christian Communication? Let's look at this in two ways.

First way: we're 'preaching to the converted'. We use a style of language that, in my youth, I can remember being referred to as 'the language of Zion'. It is rich in biblical words and phrases; it presents a point of view in which God is totally real; sin, temptation, judgement, prayer, spiritual warfare are the realities; Jesus is vividly real, ever-present; the way to deal with any problem is through prayer and spiritual guidance.

Second way: the reality is the real world right around us. Our faith doesn't shield us from those realities. Our responsibility is to set a model of communication to the non-believer.

In many ways these two forms of language refer to the same things, but to the non-believer the first style makes no sense. It seems to relate to a different fantasy world; the language makes sense to the 'in' group; the same could be said of what the in group do during worship -- incomprehensible and irrelevant to everyday life.

I have come across examples of earnest, intense, well-meant communication that fails because it is couched in type-1 language. It is fairly obvious that it fails for the non-believer. I would argue that it fails for the believers also because it doesn't offer them a model of language in which they can comprehensibly commend the gospel they love and treasure.