

A Discussion Guide to
JOHN DICKSON'S

The Best Kept Secret of
Christian Mission

Promoting the Gospel with More Than Our Lips

Written by
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How to Get the Most Out of the Discussion Guide

This discussion guide is designed to help small groups navigate the material in John Dickson's book *The Best Kept Secret of Christian Mission* in a manner that will stimulate discussion and help group members think about how these issues might affect their lives. Participants will be given the opportunity to consider how the key ideas presented might impact their own unique life situation.

- Make sure participants have read the relevant chapter of *The Best Kept Secret of Christian Mission*; otherwise, many of the questions will be obscure. The guide essentially reflects the flow of the book and should be easy to follow. Encourage each other to be up-to-date with the reading prior to coming to the group.
- Don't worry about trying to complete all the questions. Decide as a group which ones to focus on, and allow the discussion to go where it takes you. There is no need to rush through it all.
- Make sure you leave time for prayer—the most basic mission activity.
- Encourage honesty and don't shut each other down for it. This topic raises all sorts of fears (and enthusiasms), and these are best dealt with in a safe and open manner.
- Expect and allow for very different responses to the topics covered. People are wired differently. We all have unique experiences to bring to the discussion. These perspectives will enrich the discussion. Respect and good listening will aid the process immeasurably.
- Give priority to biblical passages. Make sure the words of God loom large in the discussion.

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Introduction

Confessions of an Over-Eager Evangelist

The gospel is not a theological idea or two. It is theology grounded in the actual events of Jesus' life. (page 21)

1. Tick the box[es] that best describe your reaction to the thought of sharing your faith with others.

- I feel sick in the stomach.
- I get excited and can't wait to do it.
- I feel I should tell people about Jesus and feel guilty that I don't.
- I'm frustrated that there aren't more opportunities to do this.
- I fear that people will think I'm a religious nut.
- I envy people who can do this easily.
- I don't understand why all Christians are not as excited about this as I am.
- I'm tired of being told to evangelise people—it's just not me.

Spend a minute or two sharing your responses.

2. Read the following scenarios and explain how each situation makes you feel.

- Your pastor invites you to be a part of a door-knocking team inviting people to an Easter church service.
- A colleague from work asks you why you go to church.
- While discussing another colleague, friend at work says, "He's alright, but he's a bit of a Bible basher."
- Your pastor asks you about joining a prayer group to pray for the people invited to the Easter service.
- Someone suggests you invite some friends from church and some long-term friends who are not Christians to a BBQ.
- You are asked to be part of a group planning a special morning tea for the Easter service.

3. Discuss what the previous two exercises tell you about your attitude toward evangelism and promoting the gospel.

The Curse of Self-Consciousness

4. Make a list of your favourite topics of conversation. What makes them easy to talk about?

5. How can Christians avoid the problem of appearing like salespeople and “steer[ing] the conversation in a most unconversational manner”? (page 19)

Gospel “Download”

6. What are the pitfalls of a full gospel “download”? When might one be appropriate?

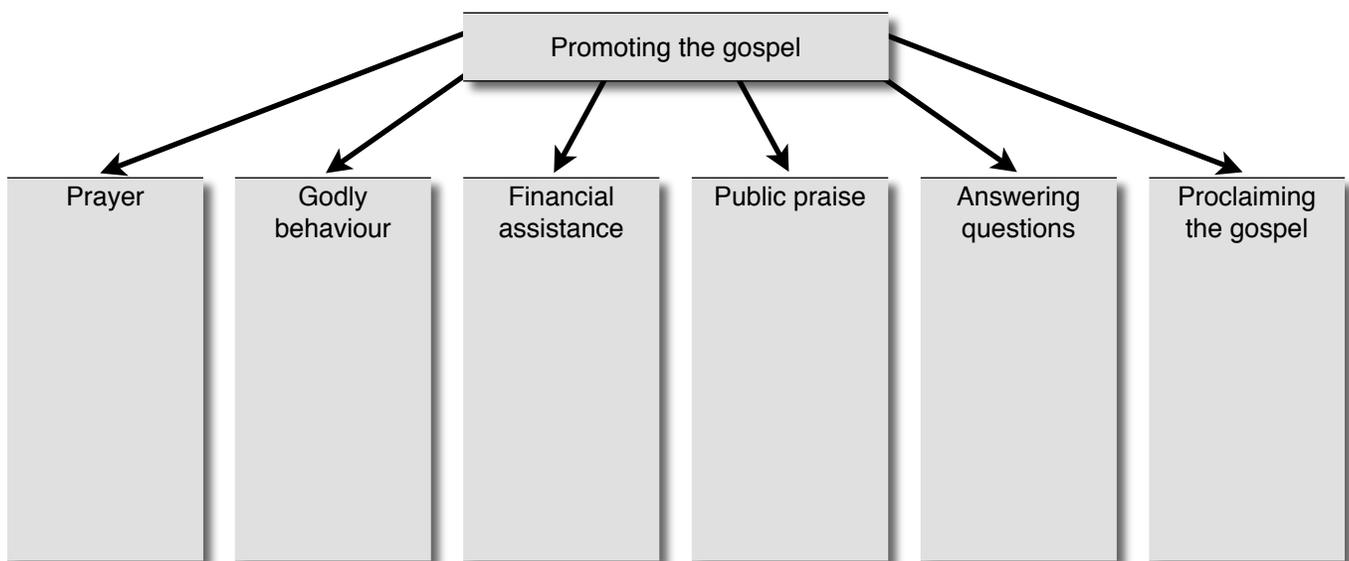
7. Discuss your response to the idea that “most Christians are not evangelists.” (page 20)

Reducing the Gospel (pages 21–22)

8. Write a brief summary of “the gospel.”

Underestimating the Mission

9. For each of the categories below, write down examples of how they could promote the gospel.



10. What are the two possible pitfalls of downplaying the role of each of the mission activities? (pages 22–23) Do you agree with this assessment?

11. What distinction is made between *promoting* the gospel and *proclaiming* the gospel? (page 23)

12. Read Romans 1:1–6.

What does this passage teach us about the message of the gospel?

Prayer

Thank God for the good news of Jesus. Pray that all the members of the group will come to live the gospel so that they become a light to those around them. May each person promote the gospel with whatever gifts God has given him or her.

The One and the Many

Why Get Involved in Mission?

Summary

Why reach out to people with the gospel? There is one Lord to whom all people owe their allegiance, and so God's people are to spread that knowledge to the world.

Not until we have become humble and teachable, standing in awe of God's holiness and sovereignty ... acknowledging our own littleness, distrusting our own thoughts, and willing to have our minds turned upside down, can divine wisdom become ours.

J. I. Packer¹

1. Write down the top three reasons why you think we need to share the good news of Christ with other people. Discuss these with someone in the group.

a)

b)

c)

The Bible's Most Basic Doctrine

2. What are the most important implications of the doctrine that *there is one God?* (pages 26–27)

3. What things in your own life compete with the one true God for your allegiance and devotion?

Psalm 96 and the Universal Duty

4. How would you describe the picture of God given in Psalm 96:7–9? (page 28)

¹ J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1973), 109.

5. Why might reverent “fear” be the appropriate response to God?

Psalm 96 and the Great Mission Equation

6. Identify the key reason we are to give our lives to promoting the gospel. (pages 30–33)

Matthew 28:16–20 and the Mission Equation

7. Describe in your own words the relationship between monotheism and the gospel of Jesus.

8. When you think about promoting the gospel, what are the main benefits you think it will bring to people? List these and discuss them in your group in light of the *fundamental* reason identified in the book. (see especially page 35)

9. What does it mean to live under the reality that “Jesus is Lord”? What are the implications of this claim for how we live our lives?

10. Turn to Psalm 97 and read it in the group. Consider the aspects of the psalm that reflect the glory of God and the reasons for our need to praise and honour him.

Key Point

Write down the key point of the chapter.

Prayer

As a group, praise God—the one true Lord. Pray that as you seek to live lives that honour him, you will reflect something of God’s love in the world and among the people you encounter. Pray for wisdom and strength in promoting the good news of Jesus in a manner that shows love to those who do not know him.

The Many and the One

The Challenge of Pluralism

Summary

In its various forms, pluralism fails both in offering genuine respect to the different faiths and in providing satisfying answers to life's biggest spiritual questions.

As one can ascend to the top of a house by means of a ladder or a bamboo or a staircase or a rope, so diverse are the ways and means to approach God, and every religion in the world shows one of those ways.

Ramakrishna Paramahansa²

1. Why are the sentiments expressed in the quote above so popular in the community today?
2. Read about Paul's mission in pluralist Athens. (Acts 17:16–34) What are some of the biggest stumbling blocks to belief in the Christian faith that people face today?

Pluralism Is...

3. Use the definition of pluralism from pages 39–40 to write your own.

Popular Pluralism

4. What are the most attractive aspects of a pluralist view of the world?

² Quoted by Susan Schaeffer Macauley in *How to Be Your Own Selfish Pig: And Other Ways You've Been Brainwashed* (Summit Press, 2003).

5. Briefly summarise the essential contradictions in different religions (highlighted on pages 40–41) in the space below.

God	Jesus	Afterlife
Christianity	Christianity	Hinduism
Hinduism	Judaism	Buddhism
Buddhism	Islam	Christianity

6. If John Dickson is correct in suggesting “the God who produced the Bible could not possibly be the one who produced the Koran (Islamic scriptures), the Tripitaka (Buddhist scriptures), or the Upanishads (Hindu scriptures)” (page 41), then what should be a Christian’s response to pluralism when it is encountered at work, among friends, in a family, or at the university? Discuss this in the group.

Sophisticated Pluralism

7. How plausible do you find Marcus Borg’s assessment of what various religions claim to possess as opposed to what they *actually* possess? (page 42) Why might such a stance actually trivialise religions rather than respect them?

8. What makes the presumption of *sophisticated pluralism* so spectacular? (pages 42–43)

9. Do you agree that pluralism “promises much more than it delivers”? (page 45)

10. How might Christians go about reflecting a truly tolerant attitude when promoting the gospel? In your experience, are Christians good at this?

11. Read the quotation from C. S. Lewis below.

If you are a Christian you do not have to believe that all the other religions are simply wrong all through. If you are an atheist you do have to believe that the main point in all the religions of the whole world is simply one huge mistake. If you are a Christian, you are free to think that all those religions ... contain at least some hint of the truth ... But, of course, being a Christian does mean thinking that where Christianity differs from other religions, Christianity is right and they are wrong. As in arithmetic, there is only one right answer to a sum, and all other answers are wrong; but some of the wrong answers are much nearer being right than others.

C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*³

Discuss how such an attitude could be helpful for Christians as they relate to people with a pluralist mindset. What concessions might one offer as a means of keeping communication lines open?

12. Read John 14:6 and Acts 4:1–12. Discuss the essentials of the gospel message and how this relates to the issue of pluralism.

Key Point

Write down the key point of the chapter.

Prayer

Spend time praying in the group that you might have a clear response to the pluralist belief that all religions are essentially the same. Pray that people whom you know will come to give due honour to the one true God.

³ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (London: Fount Paperbacks, 1997), 29.

Following the “Friend of Sinners”

*The Missionary Mind of the
Ordinary Christian*

Summary

As Christians, we are called to devote all of our lives—including our social lives—to giving honour to God and caring deeply for the salvation of others.

One of the most striking aspects of Jesus’ ministry ... was his regular socialising with people classed as “sinners”. (page 49)

1. Begin by reading about Jesus’ treatment of the sinner Zacchaeus. (Luke 19:1–10)
2. Discuss examples, either positive or negative, of either being involved in, or being on the receiving end of, efforts to spread the faith. Try to identify what it was that made the experience good or bad.
3. Share in the group the feelings you have about evangelism and any “cringe factor” in your own life. Consider the range of feelings as they come up in discussion.

Jesus: The Original “Friend of Sinners”

4. Make a list of the people you would regard as good friends who are not yet believers.
5. How should Jesus’ attitude to mixing with “sinners” shape our own response to nonbelievers around us?

Real Life

Irish journalist Neil McCormick writes of his experience at a Christian outreach meeting in his youth:

“There were familiar faces ... cups of tea and biscuits and everybody was being nice and solicitous, as committed Christians almost invariably are, but it was hard to escape the feeling that this was a recruitment drive and that they were more interested in my soul than in me.”

Neil McCormick, *I Was Bono’s Doppelganger* (London: Penguin, 2004), 126.

6. How do you respond to McCormick's claim that they were "more interested in my soul than in me"?

7. List some of the people who have been influential in your own faith journey. Why were they so significant?

8. Discuss practical ways in which Christians can avoid a Christian enclave and become involved in real relationships with people who are not believers.

Paul: The Flexible Apostle

9. What is the key point made here about Paul's "flexible" approach to Gentiles, Jews and weak Christians? (page 54)

Banquets, Believers and the Mission of Christ

10. By what three goals does Paul suggest our social lives should be governed? (pages 56–57)

a)

b)

c)

11. For the modern person, thinking about mission has little or nothing to do with eating, drinking and food laws, but Paul's teaching is still relevant today.

How can Christians apply Paul's principles to a modern context?

Christ's Photos

12. "By what we say and do we communicate to those around us that the Lord desires the fellowship of sinners." (page 59)

How might we live in such a way as to do this effectively?

The "Salvific Mindset"

13. According to John Dickson, every aspect of our lives can and should be directed toward God's glory and the redemption of others.

Discuss the ways in which this might be:

- a challenge?
- an encouragement?

14. Read Luke 7:36–50.

Discuss what this event reveals about Jesus.

Key Point

Write down the key point of the chapter.

Prayer

Pray that God's Spirit will help you to see other people as Jesus sees them. Pray for genuine relationships with nonbelievers that powerfully reflect God's love for them. Ask God that your nonbelieving friends may see something of Jesus' love for them through you and that this will make a lasting impression on them.

The Hidden Mission

Promoting the Gospel with Our Prayers

Summary

The most basic and essential gospel-promoting task, and one that everyone can be a part of, is prayer.

The greatest lack today is not people or funds. The greatest need is prayer.

Wesley Duewel, head of OMS International⁴

1. Begin by reading Matthew 9:35–38.

2. When I think about my role in promoting the gospel, I would rate my prayer life as:

- Vital
- Nonexistent
- Strong
- Haphazard
- Not the most important thing that I can do

3. “God is already working. Our task is, through prayer, to work out what it is he is doing and to get involved. This is the great privilege of promoting the gospel.”

How might such an attitude shape the way we view both prayer and direct action in promoting the gospel?

Compassion and Prayer

4. What is your primary motivation for reaching out to the lost? Remember that our own feelings are often clouded by self-interest, guilt, pressure to conform to our church culture, and desire to feel good about ourselves.

5. How might looking to Jesus help us in this area?

Prayer and Mission throughout the Bible

⁴Wesley Duewel, *Touch the World Through Prayer* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 13.

6. How do Solomon's words from 1 Kings 8:41–43 help to emphasise the importance of prayer? (page 67)

Pleading with God

7. Do you agree that evangelism and prayer are two sides of the one coin? Why or why not? (page 71) How effectively does your life reflect this reality?

8. Discuss ways in which “compassionate, regular prayer for unbelieving friends, family and world” (page 71) could be built into your routine?

Lifting the Gospel above Our Circumstances

9. Why might prayer be one of the most important aspects of promoting the gospel?

10. What examples from your own experience have illustrated how prayer can “lift the work of the gospel above mere circumstances and into the hands of the One who governs all things”? (page 73) Share these as a group.

Real Life

Brett has been a Christian for many years. He was converted at a holiday camp when he was sixteen. He has faithfully attended church and home groups in the twenty years since, and he finds great encouragement and support from his church community. He has never once been able to share his faith with someone or see anyone he was close to put his or her faith in Jesus. He feels completely inadequate in this area, especially as evangelism is so strongly emphasised at his church.

None of Brett's family is Christian. He longs for them to share in what he thinks is the best news ever. Attempted conversations about God are stilted and awkward and occasionally hostile. Brett's dad is getting older, and his health is deteriorating. Brett describes his dad as “a good bloke” who loves his family and has led a generally decent life. Brett loves his dad. They have a good relationship, but his dad never understood how his son “got religion.” It is one area where they simply cannot relate.

11. What would you say to Brett by way of encouraging him in relation to his ageing father and in his own role as a promoter of the gospel? Discuss the various responses in the group.

The Hidden Mission

12. If the most basic gospel-promoting task “requires *faith* more than activism, *dependence* more than programs, and *humility* more than boldness” (page 75), how might this lesson shape what we do:

- as a community of faith?

- as individuals?

Key Point

Write down the key point of the chapter.

Prayer

Spend time praying as a group for the promotion of the gospel in your own circumstances. Especially consider things that look illogical, unlikely, or even impossible from where you stand. Give these things to God and ask him to work powerfully in these situations.

Partners for Life

Promoting the Gospel with Our Money

Summary

Financial support of gospel-promoting activities is not a second-string contribution to God's mission. It is true and full partnership in the gospel.

We must not think that gospel preachers are the only ones engaged in God's mission to the world. If we are financially supporting the work of the gospel, we are full "partners" in this task. (page 81)

1. Begin by reading Paul's praise of the Philippians. (Philippians 4:10–20)
2. Rank the following in terms of importance in promoting the gospel from 1 (the least important) to 6 (the most important).
 - Prayer
 - Financial giving
 - Evangelism
 - Acts of Christian kindness
 - Normal church services of public praise
 - Strong relationships with nonbelievers

Briefly discuss the outcome in the group.

3. What might the ranking that various people in the group give to these activities say about:
 - the unique makeup of each person?
 - the broad nature of promoting the gospel?
4. Discuss examples you have seen where financial giving has provided a powerful support to the promotion of the gospel.

Partnership at Philippi

5. Paul saw financial giving as *full* partnership in the gospel. (page 78) Do you see it as full partnership? Why or why not?

Types of Financial Partnership

6. How might you go about thoroughly “propemp[ing]” people sent out for gospel and missionary work? (page 80) Think about specific examples of ways your church community could do better at this. Consider the people your church is supporting.

Giving Honour to the Partners

7. When you have contributed financially to promoting the gospel, have you felt like a “player” or a “spectator” in the task? Why?

8. What might John Chrysostom (page 82) have to say to wealthy people today regarding their role in gospel work? Consider some innovative ways finances could be effectively used for gospel promotion in contemporary society.

Doing Some Gospel Sums

9. Discuss responses to the following scenarios:

Rowan and Kerry are in their mid-thirties with two young children. They have a large mortgage that just got bigger when they decided to put extensions onto their small two-bedroom house. They have had to budget hard to get to this stage and do not have much spare cash. They have plans for their family in the future and are thinking about education for the kids.

- How might they respond to calls to be generous to gospel-promoting activities?

Danielle has been at university for two years, with another two to go. She works part-time in a clothing store. As a student, she doesn’t have much money, and she pays her parents a small amount of rent. Danielle would love to contribute financially to all sorts of things, including gospel-related activities, but she says the reality is that it will have to wait until after university.

- Is she correct in this assessment?

Naomi is a very successful lawyer. She works hard and earns big money in a large city firm. Her husband, Rob, earns a quarter of what she earns. They are both Christians, and Rob is extremely generous with money, giving to friends in need, to charities, and to other gospel-promoting work. Naomi has enormous difficulty spending any money at all. She grew up in a family that was extremely frugal. Rob wants to give large amounts of their money away, but Naomi can't seem to bring herself to do it.

- How could they resolve this tension?

10. Read 2 Corinthians 9:1–15. Paul speaks here about a collection from the Corinthian church for the destitute Christians in Jerusalem. What does this passage have to say to us about our attitude to giving in response to everything that God has done for us?

11. Money and giving are sensitive issues in the church. How might we develop a culture of generous giving? How might we give others permission to keep us accountable? Is this desirable?

12. Suggest a (gracious) response to each of the following statements based on your understanding of the role of giving in the promotion of the gospel.

- All the money I have, I have earned through hard work. It is really hard to give it away.
- I'd rather give to the starving in Africa. There is such a need there.
- All the money I give goes directly into evangelistic activities. I want to save souls, not bodies.
- I am the one doing the evangelism. I don't feel the need to be giving lots of money as well. That's for others who are more called and equipped for that activity.

Key Point

Write down the key point of the chapter.

Prayer

Ask God to give you generous hearts, and pray that you will find joy in contributing financially to the promotion of the gospel and for the care of others. Ask for help in gaining a healthy perspective on wealth and for freedom from slavery to things. Pray for some specific gospel-promotion activities requiring financial assistance.

Being the Light of the World

*Promoting the Gospel through the
Works of the Church*

Summary

The good deeds of the Christian community serving the needs of others are a powerful way to lead others to love and worship the one true God.

Mere waiting and looking is not Christian behaviour ... Christians are called to sympathy and action.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer⁵

1. Kathy's story and her claim that the "kindness" of the people in the church was "100 percent responsible" for her coming to faith is a reminder to take seriously Jesus' words from Matthew 5:16, "Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven." (pages 85–87)

Share your own knowledge of this type of Christian kindness. Spend some time considering the impact of these actions on people's lives.

The "Light of the World" (Matthew 5:14–16)

2. Do you agree with the argument that good deeds on their own can promote the gospel? Why or why not? (page 89)

3. If Jesus taught that good deeds can contribute to the conversion of the world, why do some of us find it so hard to get motivated to do them?

⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, quoted in Geoffrey B. Kelly, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Theology of Liberation," *Dialog* 34 (Winter 1995), 26.

The Good Deeds of the Christian Community

4. Consider the ways in which your church community is involved in the “silent dimension” of promoting the gospel. In what ways could it do better in this area?

Real Life

In 1981, a Laotian family of a mother, father, and five children were nearing the end of a full year in a Thai refugee camp. Their escape from communist Laos had been daring, and risky and they had left their home with only the clothes they wore and two small suitcases.

A small country church in Australia, spurred on by some enthusiastic members of the congregation, committed to being this family’s means of support. The church sponsored the family to move to Australia and was responsible for finding housing and gathering clothing for the seven new arrivals, as well as teaching them English, shopping, and settling the children into schooling. Bong Kinnavong, the mother of the family, says, “They treated us like we were a part of their family.” For the eighteen years before they left the town, the Kinnavongs were a strong part of the church community.

5. What do you find most impressive about this example of Christian “good deeds”?

How Good Deeds Conquered an Empire

6. What inspiration might we find from early Christians in being the light of the world?

7. What areas of the Christian community’s “good deeds” do you personally find most inspiring?

8. What place did the doctrine of grace take in providing impetus for promoting Christian good works? (see page 94) What encouragement can you offer each other to respond to God’s grace in similar ways?

9. What is the most striking aspect of Rodney Stark’s assessment of the rise of early Christianity? (pages 94–95) How could the same “revolutionary stuff” have a powerful impact today?

10. Do you agree that good deeds must never be thought of as a missionary tactic? (page 95) Why or why not? How should this affect where we give our time, money, and energy?

Poverty Relief: An Opportunity to Address a Real Need

He has showed you, O man, what is good.
And what does the LORD require of you?
To act justly and to love mercy
and to walk humbly with your God.

Micah 6:8

11. Consider the ways your group could become involved together in conveying “light” to the world, both locally and globally. Think about care for the sick or aged, the poor, the lonely. Form a plan to work toward a goal this year.

12. Read Matthew 5:13–16.

Think of ways you could implement a response to these verses in the way that you live this week.

Key Point

Write down the key point of the chapter.

Prayer

Pray for opportunities and the strength to respond to the needs of others. Pray that the Christian church might stand out as a true light in the darkness of poverty, disease, and loneliness. Pray that you might be called into the place where your personal passions and the places of greatest need intersect.

Being Beautiful

Promoting the Gospel through Christian Behaviour

Summary

Individual believers can live lives of such love and good character that they “beautify” the gospel and make it more attractive to unbelievers.

God breaks not all men’s hearts the same.

Richard Baxter (1615–1691)

1. The story of Tim Winton and his family is pertinent. What can we learn from Len Thomas’s action in relating to the Winton family? Discuss your reactions to this.

Conversion “without a Word” (1 Peter 3:1–2)

2. Is Peter’s teaching about being able to win people over to Christ “without a word” surprising? Why?

3. How is it possible to reconcile the words of the apostle Paul with that of Peter? (page 99–101) Use the space below to indicate this.

Peter (1 Peter 3:1–2)

Reconciling the two

Paul (Romans 10:17)

4. What was the most significant factor in your coming to Christ? Share the various responses in the group.

5. What do you think is meant by the “gospel word” being the *necessary* and *sufficient* cause of faith without always being the *primary* cause? (page 101)

Is 1 Peter 3:1–2 a “Let Off”?

6. How might 1 Peter 3:1–2 be seen as an encouragement rather than a “loophole” to avoid promoting the gospel? (pages 101–103)

7. List some situations where words about the gospel may be difficult or inappropriate.

Real Life

Phillip and Lorraine are a Christian couple with grown-up children. Their daughter, Katrina, is in a gay relationship. Unlike her gay friends who came from Christian homes and are now estranged from their parents, Katrina enjoys a close relationship with her mum and dad.

There have been many occasions when Phillip has helped Katrina’s friends move house, mend fences, repair roofs, fix rotting verandas, and other manual tasks. He sees this as a natural thing to help people he knows who are in need. Lorraine comments that gay women are often surprised by what they see as unexpected kindness coming from a Christian man.

8. Phillip wouldn’t consider himself an evangelist. He doesn’t speak to these women about the gospel. How might he and people like him find encouragement from 1 Peter, that he is playing a vital role in promoting the gospel?

9. Look up the following New Testament passages. Note the things they say about the impact of Christian behaviour on people who are not yet believers.

a) 1 Thessalonians 4:11–12

b) Philippians 4:5

c) Colossians 4:5

Making the Gospel Beautiful (Titus 2:9–10)

Kindness has converted more sinners than zeal, eloquence, and learning.

Frederick W. Faber (1814–1863)

10. Do you agree that it is important to acknowledge the damaging things done by some Christians over the centuries? Why or why not?

11. Consider the way good lives of believers can enhance the appearance of the gospel in the minds of those who hear it.

12. Discuss examples you have seen of this working well. Where has the opposite occurred?

13. As God has entrusted his reputation to his children (pages 105–106), how do you think your local Christian community is doing in representing God to the world around it?

Evangelism and Godliness

14. The example from Titus and the work of the gospel on the island of Crete shows the intertwined nature of evangelism and the behaviour of the Christians in the area. (page 107)

As preachers speak of God's generosity,
Christians are called to...



As preachers declare God's forgiveness,
Christians are to...



As preachers announce Christ as the truth,
Christians are to be marked by...



I choose kindness ... I will be kind to the poor, for they are alone. Kind to the rich, for they are afraid. And kind to the unkind, for such is how God has treated me.

Max Lucado⁶

15. Share your own stories of the way Christian kindness has provided a fitting support to the proclamation of the message of Jesus.

Key Point

Write down the key point of the chapter.

Prayer

Pray that God will enable the people in your group to contribute both as a community and as individuals to beautifying the gospel. Pray that God not only provides the opportunity to do this, but also the wisdom, strength, and desire to do it effectively. Pray that you will all get involved in this promotion of the gospel with a glad heart out of thankfulness to God.

⁶ Max Lucado, *Grace for the Moment* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 12.

What Is the Gospel?

The Message We Promote

Summary

The gospel is the grand news of God's kingdom opened up to a sinful world through the birth, life, teaching, healings, death, and resurrection of God's Messiah, who will return to overthrow evil and consummate the kingdom for eternity.

The gospel is not only theology – a message about atonement and Lordship – it is *news of events*. (page 121)

1. If a ten-year-old were to ask you the question, “What is the gospel?” how would you respond? As a group, construct a simple explanation.
2. When have you experienced confusing messages about the content of the gospel? Share your answers.
3. What danger is there in talking about theological themes like sin and atonement without placing these within the context of the story of Jesus?

The Kingdom of God: The Theme of the Gospel

4. Why would Christian claims of a new gospel have sounded like a challenge to Rome? (page 113)

5. In your own words, summarise the central theme of the gospel.

6. Do you agree that the richness of this message is best seen in light of the whole sweep of the biblical story and Old Testament expectations? Why?

The Deeds of the Messiah: The Content of the Gospel

7. Do you agree that the core of “telling the gospel” must engage the hearer with the narrative of Christ’s life? (page 115) Why or why not? How would such an idea shape the way your church should seek to reach others with the gospel?

A Bullet-Point Summary of the Gospel: 1 Corinthians 15:3–5

8. Write down the bullet-point summary of the gospel from page 117.

-
-
-
-
-

How well does this match up with your idea of the content of the gospel? Discuss your answers.

9. Why is the term “Christ” so significant in the summary of the gospel? (pages 118–120) How would you go about explaining that significance to someone who doesn’t know it? Discuss your ideas in the group.

10. Would much be lost if we removed the atoning death of Jesus from an understanding of the gospel story? Explain your ideas to others in the group. (page 120)

11. A university student challenges your Christian faith by suggesting that Jesus was merely one of many wise teachers. What might be an appropriate response?

12. A friend at work declares that she really likes Jesus' teaching and that Jesus lives on in the way his wisdom has been passed on. But she doesn't think that belief in resurrection really matters. How do you respond? Discuss an appropriate response. (page 122)

Real Life

C. S. Lewis, the Christian apologist and author of the Narnia fantasy series, describes his conversion from atheism to faith in Christ as a gradual process. A multitude of factors were at play, he says, as God "closed in" on him.

"You must picture me alone in my room in Magdalen College, night after night, feeling, whenever my mind lifted even for a second from my work, the steady, unrelenting approach of Him who I so earnestly desired not to meet. That which I greatly feared had at last come upon me. In the Trinity Term of 1929 I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed: perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England."

Lewis reports that he initially was converted to theism and only later came to understand Jesus to be the centre of all reality. "I had hoped that the heart of reality might be of such a kind that we can best symbolise it as a place; instead I found it to be a person."

13. Discuss what it is about Lewis's conversion that echoes the key idea of this chapter.

The Gospel and the Gospels

14. Where in the Gospels do we find the themes: (pages 126–127)

- a) sin and judgement?
- b) forgiveness and atonement?
- c) repentance and faith?

The First Gospel Messages

15. What are the implications for the way we present Jesus to our friends if the themes of sin, atonement, and forgiveness must be placed within the events that gave these ideas their full expression? (page 134)

16. What might make it hard to simply point people to the Gospels as the means of capturing the substance of the Christian faith? How might you go about overcoming this difficulty? (see page 140)

Key Point

Write down the key point of the chapter.

Prayer

Ask God to give each person in the group a deep and lasting understanding of the essential message of the gospel. Pray that the meaning and significance of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection would be ever present in your lives and that God would use each of you to bring others into his kingdom.

The Few and the Many

Evangelists and the Local Church

Summary

Evangelists are people whom Christ has given to the church for the specific task of proclaiming the gospel.

When you get to heaven God won't ask you why you weren't more like Billy Graham. He may ask you why you weren't more like you. Get in touch with who you are ... Be yourself and let God use you.

Rick Warren

1. Consider the people you know who are gifted evangelists. What is it that makes them effective?
2. When talk turns to evangelism, what feelings do you most associate with the topic? (Tick one or more of the following boxes.)
 - Guilt
 - Fear
 - Excitement
 - Frustration
 - Confusion
 - Acceptance and peace about your current role

Real Life

Mark is a unique person. He is known for his skill in reaching out to people with the gospel and finding new and interesting ways of doing this. He has been known to enter a bar, buy himself a beer, and then announce loudly: "I'm going to be sitting in this corner. If anyone would like to come and talk about Jesus, come over!"

3. What questions would you have for Mark about this type of outreach?

Real Life

William Wilberforce, the well-known nineteenth-century British politician who, among other things, is known for his role in the successful fight to end slavery, was also a committed evangelist. It is said that he frequently placed a small pebble in his shoe to remind him to take up any opportunity to talk about the gospel with people he met. Another prominent politician once jokingly complained about Wilberforce visiting him when he was sick. "I can barely have a conversation with Wilberforce without him trying to convert me," he remarked.

4. What questions would you have for Wilberforce about this type of evangelism?

5. Do you agree that “the existence of evangelists like these [above] should not make us feel guilty that our own gospel opportunities are less frequent, less daring and less comprehensive; it should be a cause of rejoicing”? (page 142)

6. What response do you have to the claim that “God’s Word does not teach that every Christian is an evangelist”? (page 142)

The Word “Evangelist”

7. Write down a definition of an *evangelist*.

8. What are the various labels by which those involved in evangelism were known in Paul’s letters? (pages 143–144)

Evangelists in the New Testament

9. Under each Bible reference, note the individual (or groups of) evangelists mentioned. Describe their situation. (pages 144–147)

a) 2 Corinthians 8:18

b) Philippians 4:2–3

c) Colossians 1:7 and 4:12–13

d) Philippians 1:14–17

e) Acts 21:8

f) 2 Timothy 4:5

10. Consider the implications of Ephesians 4:8–12. (see pages 148–149)

What is your reaction to the argument that it is a misuse of the Bible to suggest all Christians must be evangelists?

Real Life

Sarah is a physiotherapist in her late twenties. She is a gregarious person with lots of friends, both Christian and non-Christian. People describe her as having a “real presence,” and although she would not consider herself an extrovert, she is certainly self-assured and finds it easy to relate to a wide range of people. Sarah is well known among her friends as someone who finds it easy to talk about her faith. If you were to observe her at a party or at coffee shop with friends, you would witness a very natural and easy manner in which matters of faith flow out of her conversation. Her friends who aren’t Christian are in no doubt about her Christian commitment and respect her for it. They often comment that she is easy to talk to about such things and does not come across as judgemental or forcing her views onto others.

11. Sarah doesn’t think of herself as an evangelist. How might you encourage her in her role in promoting the gospel?

Real Life

Mike is twenty-eight years old. He has been a Christian throughout his life, having been brought up in a Christian home. His father is a well-known evangelistic speaker, and Mike sees himself fulfilling a similar role. The problem is, those closest to Mike think his gifts lie elsewhere. He has been involved in music for many years and provides an excellent contribution to the music in the church. In truth, Mike has virtually no friends who are not Christian and doesn’t really relate well to nonbelievers.

12. How might Mike’s friends best encourage him to promote the gospel?

Picking the Evangelist Today

13. What are the four points suggested as the means of picking the evangelists among you?

- a)
- b)
- c)
- d)

14. Try ranking the four points in order of the importance you think they should be given. Discuss them in the group.

15. Write down the name of someone you know who you think fits into the categories above. Consider how you might encourage him or her to use the gifts God has given them in this area.

Key Point

Write down the key point of the chapter.

Prayer

Pray for the people in your church community who are gifted in evangelism. Thank God for those who are filled with a desire to tell others about him and are well equipped to do it. Pray that God would raise up more people to share the good news of Jesus to the world and effectively grow his people

Heralds Together

Promoting the Gospel through Our Public Praise

Summary

When the Christian community gathers for services of worship that are gospel focused, heartfelt, and intelligible to all, they are promoting God's glory to the world.

When we gather to declare the wonders of God, we are engaged in promoting God's glory to the world. (page 171)

1. Tick the box of the statement[s] you most relate to:

When I think of nonbelievers coming to our regular church services, I:

- think they would be bored to tears.
- would be proud to bring them along.
- suspect they wouldn't be overwhelmed by the friendliness of the place.
- would feel embarrassed about the way things are done.
- would feel confident about how appealing the service is.
- hope God could work despite what happens in the service.

2. To what extent do you believe that the church service you attend is a promotion of Christ to the world?

From the Psalms to the Synagogues

3. How significant is it for Christians today that public praise in ancient Israel was one of God's ways of convincing Gentiles to "bow the knee to the Lord"? (see pages 157–159)

Declaring God's Praise: 1 Peter 2:9

4. What important lessons can be drawn from 1 Peter 2:9 regarding the place of public praise of God?

5. The author says that while praise is often directed toward God, outsiders often overhear it. What would you want “outsiders” to “overhear” from public services today?

6. How do you react to the notion that the activities of our services—the readings, preaching, creeds, and “psalms, hymns and spiritual songs”—do in fact declare the praises of God? (page 163)

The Triumphal Entry: Luke 19:28–40

7. Do you agree that all true praise has the potential to be gospel proclamation? (page 164) Why or why not?

8. What role do you see for “seeker services” at church? What might be the pitfalls of an overemphasis on these types of events?

Conversion in the Church: 1 Corinthians 14:23–26

9. What help does Acts 2 provide in understanding the Spirit’s work of prophecy mentioned in the Corinthians passage? (see pages 168–169)

10. If what happens in the weekly service is so significant in announcing the wonders of God, what should our personal attitude be toward this service? What might we do to encourage all people to use the gifts God has given them to make this service (and the time before and after) a powerful witness to the gospel?

Real Life

Lauren was raised in a Catholic home, but she had not been practising her faith for many years when she recently attended a modern Protestant church. The building was modern, the music was funky, and the whole atmosphere was casual and relaxed. People wore shorts and T-shirts and flip-flops. Some were in bare feet. Friends greeted each other loudly, and Lauren felt like she was on a social outing, with people having fun together. Much of this she found appealing, but as a church experience, she felt a little cheated. “There just wasn’t enough reverence for me,” she suggested. “We were addressing God, after all! The Bible doesn’t treat God lightly, and I don’t think people should either.”

11. What place should reverence and fear of God have in the modern church? Is there something to be gained by retaining a sense of awesome wonder and respect for God in modern worship? How might this be achieved?

Key Point

Write down the key point of the chapter.

Prayer

Thank God for the opportunity to meet together as his people, to worship him, to hear from his Word, to pray to him, to be encouraged as Christians, and to build each other up. Pray for the right perspective on public praise, that it might be a time of great enthusiasm and eagerness to praise God. Ask God that others may be drawn to him through the activity of your church's public praise.

- c) You recommend they speak to someone else.
 - d) You plan to give them a book that explains Christianity.
- You are in a group of friends who are nonbelievers. One of them angrily explains that when they went to the local church to enquire about having their daughter baptised, the minister suggested they come to church for a while and think about what baptism is all about. Your reaction is to:
 - a) quickly make an awkward attempt to change the subject.
 - b) nod in seeming agreement as the others also make similar complaints about the church and Christians generally.
 - c) engage in the conversation and ask your friend to consider why she wants the baptism anyway.
 - d) wish you were somewhere else.

A Responsibility for All Christians

3. What implications are there for Christians generally if 1 Peter 3:15 and Colossians 4:6 apply to congregations rather than specifically evangelists? (pages 175–176)

4. What reaction do you have to the notion that, along with the apostle Paul, all Christians are partners in mission, shooting for the same goal if not playing the same role? Does this encourage you? Do you find it daunting?

A Range of Answers to a Range of Questions

[The following two exercises would work well in pairs.]

5. Create a list of possible situations that might require an *apokrinomai* to a nonbeliever. (see page 178) These can be real situations you have faced or ones that you can imagine being possible.

6. In what situations might a Christian need to offer an *apologia* for their faith? (page 178)

7. How might we be encouraged to see speaking up for the gospel as a privilege and not a duty to be done reluctantly?

Allegiance to Christ: The Basis of Our Speaking

What it means to be a servant of Christ is to be obligated to promote the gospel by word and example, the gospel of the crucified Messiah.

D. A. Carson⁷

8. What things make it hard to speak about your faith to others?

9. Does “faith vocabulary” form a natural part of your conversations with friends who are not yet believers? What things could make these conversations appear unnatural?

10. How might a renewed vision of Christ as Lord over all impact your daily conversations? (page 183) What things could help to maintain that vision of Christ as Lord?

The Importance of the Manner of Our Reply

11. What would it mean to respond to nonbelievers with true graciousness?

Real Life

An experience while hitchhiking provided an important lesson in relating to people with the message of Christianity for Ian Powell. He found himself in heated debate about the truth of Christianity with the female driver who had picked up Ian and his mate Larry. Ian says that while he bashed away in argument with this woman, his mate sat quietly in the back. Eventually, says Ian, Larry offered a different perspective and said, “You sound like you have been hurt by Christians,” and out came this story about how she felt that the nuns at school had seriously mistreated her.

Ian says he had a realisation that he was not really listening to what was going on. “You can argue till you’re blue in the face, but the real issue was that what this woman felt was legitimate anger. I don’t know how nasty the nuns were, but until that gets acknowledged and empathised with, she’s not going to look at Christianity ... The issue was that she’d been hurt.”

⁷ D. A. Carson, *The Cross and Christian Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 96.

12. Discuss some important elements of a gracious response one would give to someone who has been hurt by Christians in the past.

Lives Worth Questioning

13. Think of examples of how Christians might stand out in contrast to the world and thereby “live lives worth questioning, then offer answers worth hearing”? (page 188) Be specific.

Key Point

Write down the key point of the chapter.

Prayer

Pray for God’s Spirit to give you all the strength to “live lives worth questioning” and the wisdom and the grace to “offer answers worth hearing.” Pray that promoting the gospel in many and varied ways would become an exciting and central part of your life.

A Year in the Life of the Gospel

Bringing It All Together

A Journey to Faith

1. Retrace the steps of James's journey to faith. Identify the places where each of the different elements of promoting the gospel played a role.
2. Share with the group any common elements between James's story and your own journey towards faith in Christ. In what ways has your story been different from that of James?
3. Many elements played a role in James's conversion. Which of these elements can you most relate to in terms of your own contributions to promoting Christ in the world? Which do you feel least equipped to handle?
4. Share your reactions to James's story. If that story has been a personal encouragement to get involved in promoting Christ in the world, explain in what way you have been inspired.

Answering Some Common Objections

The *Gospel Bites* in Appendix 1 form an important part of *The Best Kept Secret of Christian Mission*. They highlight the way the life of Jesus—his teaching, miracles, death, and resurrection—can be a vital source of answers to some of the most common objections to Christian faith.

5. Arrange your group into pairs and have each pair select one (or two) of the listed topics:
 - Sin and forgiveness (page 204)
 - Criticism of self-righteousness (page 205)
 - Being a religious type (page 206)
 - The claim of “being good” (page 206)
 - The issue of pluralism (page 207)
 - The problem of pain and suffering (page 209)

In your pairs, read the “problem” and suggested answer. If you feel comfortable doing so, role-play the question and answer as naturally as you can.

6. Once back in the group, discuss your reactions to the exercise. Was it helpful in suggesting ways to approach objections? Why or why not?

A Modern Retelling of the Gospel

7. How helpful did you find the “retelling of the gospel” in Appendix 2? (pages 211–218)

8. Do you find the logic and sequence of this retelling compelling? Why or why not?

9. Which aspects of Jesus’ person and work do you think are the hardest to talk about? Which are the easiest?

10. How would you go about explaining the significance of Jesus’ breaking bread and drinking wine (Matthew 26:26–29) to someone who has very little understanding of Christianity?

11. How would you describe what it means to accept the reality that Jesus is Lord? What has this meant in your own life? Share responses in the group.

Prayer

Pray the Lord’s Prayer together in the group.

Our Father in heaven,
Hallowed [i.e., honoured] be your name.
Your kingdom come.
Your will be done,
 on earth as it is in heaven
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our debts [i.e., sins]
 as we forgive our debtors [i.e., those who sin against us].
And lead us not into temptation
 but deliver us from the evil one.
For yours is the kingdom,
 and the power and the glory forever. Amen.