

Session Notes: 01_SIGN post

What Kind of Sign Am I? And Where Should I Point?

setting the scene



A Sign Post can literally spell the difference between life and death.

Perhaps you've heard the true story of Chris McCandless? It's told in the movie, *Into the Wild*.

Chris was a 22-year-old who got tired of pursuing the American dream, so he gave away all his money, abandoned his family, and headed out for a life on the road. Renaming himself "Alexander Supertramp," Chris hitchhiked around the country, going where he wanted, doing as he pleased. But Supertramp was always progressing toward his utopia, the place of complete freedom: Alaska. (Warning: movie spoiler ahead!) So, finally he reaches his destination and heads out into the wild. He learns the skills to survive—to hunt, to stay warm, to adapt—but his soul has begun to die. He's alone; worse yet, he's lonely. The story ends as his food sources dry up, and he downs a poisonous berry by accident. He stumbles around the wilderness, trying to find his way back to civilization, but he only meets dead ends. Can you see him there in his discarded bus for a shelter, alone, afraid, starving, and desperately wanting a way out? Finally, weeks later, he dies. Next to his decomposed body, the police discover Chris's last inscription on the metal wall:

"happiness is only real when shared."

What a tragedy. The saddest part of this story is that his death was unnecessary. Only two kilometres further down the raging river's banks was a gauging station, sporting a metal cable crossing the water. Had he been directed there, it was only a short walk back to safety. *Salvation was at hand, if only for a Sign Post.*

Sounds like a modern parable—people everywhere following their own way that seemed right at the time, but eventually leads to death (Proverbs 14:12). What's the path to freedom? Where do you go for salvation? Jesus said that if you follow His teaching, "then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:32). How can He promise this? Because Jesus is "the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6).

So, how does this relate to our role as Sign Posts? Jesus said that when He is lifted up, He will draw all people to Himself (John 12:32). **Our role is to be a Sign Post pointing people to Jesus.**

But notice what a Sign Post doesn't do. It doesn't force someone to take a particular path—it just clearly lays out the options and allows them freedom to follow the way they think is best. *A good sign shows*

Sunday's Sign ... The BEGGAR

(Luke 7:36-50; Mark 14:9; 2 Corinthians 4:6-7)

Remember the story of the Prostitute with her alabaster jar of perfume? She cried tears of joy on Jesus' feet and fragrancd the room for she was set free—an aromatic witness. She knew how much her life stunk; she was truly poor in spirit. If you're forgiven much, then you love much. *How much have you been forgiven? And why is Jesus good news to you?* All evangelism is the overflow of worship, a loving response to God's grace that you can't help but tell others about. **So if you want to point people to Jesus, then be a BEGGAR ... Smell your own cess pit to share from the heart.**

- 🗣️ What challenged you most in this message?
- 🗣️ How would your life and witness look different if you took on the Sign of the **Beggar**?

where you've been, where you are, and where you're going. It's a simplified map that tells a type of story: past, present, and future. And as we point people to Jesus in a culture that's lost its way, that's what we need ... a simple way of sharing *The Big Story* that unites all our journeys—a story that calls all travellers to re-think (re-pent) and align with God's way to abundant life, paved by Jesus.

Your Sign Post can literally spell the difference between the way that leads to life, and the way that leads to death (Matthew 7:13-14; Luke 1:76-79; James 5:20). In this session we're going to explore what it means to be a Sign Post for the Kingdom. What does it mean to be an evangelist who carries good news to a battle weary world? What kind of Sign am I? And where should I point? By the end of session, you should be clear about how to share the *Gospel* in a way that is a clear Sign Post to all who want life.



What does an Evangelist look like? And what is the Gospel?

(cf.  Try This, p. 8)

Okay, before we put these images to the side, do you think this is an accurate picture of an evangelist and the message she or he carries? The first panel generally seems a little too polished and the second still looks like Bible soup—a lot of words, events, and names that for someone without a Church background would be really confusing. By the end of this course the hope is that the message will be a whole lot more polished, and your view of what an evangelist is will be more fluid. So to get things started, let's explore some meaty theology with a bit of background about what the Bible calls the *Gospel*, and the role of the evangelist in being a witness to it.

The Gospel of the Kingdom ...

To make a huge generalisation, when we hear the word *Gospel*, we think of Jesus Christ who came into the world to save sinners. And whilst this is absolutely the heart of our message and should be the crux of our evangelism, it's not the whole story. Worse, it's clothed in religious jargon which is foreign to most people you share with—they'll be left wondering how this message impacts their life here and now, and whether it can do anything about this hurting world around us. Unfortunately the big picture that Jesus preached has often been left behind. What did Jesus mean when He preached *the Gospel of the Kingdom*, announcing that "The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God is at hand, so repent and believe the good news" (Mark 1:14-15)? It's kind of like Chinese whispers where the more and more the message gets passed on from one person to the next, the further it simplifies and distorts—some parts of the message even get left out altogether. *We're called to announce the "Gospel," but what exactly is it?*

Let's start with the technical definitions. Going back to Jesus' time, the Gospel (εὐαγγέλιον; yoo-ang-ghel'-ee-on) was "good news," carried by the evangelist (εὐαγγελιστής; yoo-ang-ghel-is-tace') to people who hadn't heard. But what mental picture did evangelist conjure up in Jesus' day?

To start with, it was a political, not a religious term. *Gospel* was a secular phrase in wide-usage, co-opted by Christians to express what God was doing in and through Christ. The specific meaning of evangelist was that it pointed to a messenger who would run ahead of the King across the hills, coming from a place of battle, entering and declaring to the city victory over the enemy. It was a public announcement about a public event intended for the public realm of life. Because of the victory, the city has a new beginning, a different reality. The messenger would appear, raise their right hand and yell out "Rejoice, we have won the victory!" (Caesar Augustus used this phrase often as rhetoric for the new world order his reign was supposed to establish).

Perhaps the first and most famous recorded "evangelist" carrying a "Gospel" was Pheidippides, way back in 490 B.C. The Greeks were fighting a battle on the plains of Marathon, against the Persians. Marathon was their last line of defence, so Athens was held captive in fear of these invading powers. But the battle turned, and Greece won a surprise victory. Knowing that this historic event had to be announced in the



city, Pheidippides ran non-stop all the way from Marathon to Athens, a distance of 42 kilometres. Exhausted and battle-wearied, he arrived with only enough energy to cry out “Victory!” before dying on the spot. He was a herald with a crucial message to deliver. When the Athenians believed his witness, they began celebrating their new found freedom from oppressive powers.

Can you see the parallels? While the Gospel for Jesus means *more* than a political announcement of a new and conquering King and the change of an Empire—i.e., it *does* mean the forgiveness of our sins—it doesn’t mean *less* than a Kingdom shift. So in the case of Jesus (Luke 3-4:19), he

comes from a place of battle (in the wilderness with Satan), and enters Galilee preaching the *euangelion* of God: that God through Jesus has confronted the powers that hold us captive, He has won, and He offers eternal life to those who respond. God through Christ is reconciling everything to Himself (2 Corinthians 5:18-20). The heart of the message wasn’t about some future reality, but what *had already happened* ... good news right now, that a battle had been won and a new reality could now be ours ... “eternal life” beginning now, not just assurance of Heaven when you die. *But, this “Gospel,” like all Kingdom messages, required a response ...*

Interestingly, Josephus—a Jewish historian turned Roman General—once went into a newly conquered village and announced, “Repent, and believe in me!” Meaning? Turn from your ways of rebellion and align with the Kingdom of Rome. If you do, you’ll benefit from all this Kingdom has to offer. If you don’t, then when the King himself rocks up, you’ll be judged for your rebellion and thrown out of the Kingdom.

Later on this session we’ll look more at the exact message of the “Gospel of the Kingdom” (Matthew 4:23), but for now, notice what Jesus’ Kingdom is like from Luke 4:18-19:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.”

In the words of E. Stanley Jones, the Kingdom is “God’s total answer to humanity’s total need”—holistic salvation. It’s good news for the economically disinherited (Luke 6:20) as well as the spiritually poor (Matthew 5:3); good news to the socially and politically disinherited; good news to the physically disinherited; and good news to the spiritually and physically bruised and oppressed. *The year of the Lord’s favour, Jubilee, isn’t just a Heavenly hope, but an embodied hope on planet Earth that starts now, of which we are the first expression. So we are agents of this Kingdom now.*

Wrapping all this up, ***what is an evangelist?*** It’s not about being persuasive, or confident, or opinionated, or about trying to save souls and escape this sinking ship. In short, ***an evangelist is a Kingdom messenger.*** *Evangelists are people who are prepared to demonstrate the Kingdom in what they do, and point people to Jesus as a Sign Post for the Kingdom of God in what they say.* And we have good news to bring that impacts every aspect of life in the here and now, even as it points to a greater hope with the fullness of the Kingdom when Christ resurrects the cosmos. When this vision is holistically lived, and shared, we shouldn’t be surprised that outsiders press in to take hold of the Kingdom (Matthew 11:12). It represents their deepest desires in this world—for peace, justice, and happiness—which starts now and climaxes when Jesus the King returns.

So, are you an evangelist? ¹

Church as Evangelists ...

Alright, so having a little bit more of a handle on the background of the good news of the Kingdom of God, how did Jesus send us as the church to carry this message? How do we announce God's peace to a scarred world?

Read John 20:19-23: Resurrection sending

As the church, we (that's all of us together!) are sent in the power of the Holy Spirit to do exactly what Jesus did: to announce the victory of the Kingdom of God over all that corrupts what is good and turns us inward on ourselves rather than outward in love of God and each other (that's sin). This process begins when we turn from our own agenda and align ourselves with God, seeking first His Kingdom (Matthew 6:33; Mark 1:14-15; Luke 4:18-19). How do we as *evangelists* declare this victory? In word and deed, as wounded healers and sacrificial givers, bearing the scars of what it costs to confront evil and injustice in all its forms. Our alignment with God *right now*, through the Spirit, should be a Sign Post to what the world *will be* when Jesus returns and sets everything right—a Kingdom of beauty, love, freedom, peace, and community. Honestly, can you imagine how awesome the world would be without injustice, poverty, environmental destruction, sickness and disease, killing, rape, and loneliness?

Sign Posting the Gospel ...

So, our Sign Posts might look different, but they all point people to Christ and His Kingdom. But what exactly should our Sign say? How does it connect our lost friend into the bigger story of where our world was, is, and will be?

Put simply, our message is *The Big Story*, God's story. As we Sign Post this story, we call for people to realise their place in that story, and carefully choose which way they want to go. The Bible is basically a scene by scene play of *The Big Story*. But our culture is so far removed from the Bible's context, that we lose the forest for the trees. If we simply say that "Jesus saves!" then people will wonder "From what? and For what?" Jesus might be the answer, but our culture doesn't even know the question. The average non-Christian is more concerned with how to find love, make a living, enjoy life, and build good relationships. The exceptional non-Christian wants to know how to stop genocide in Darfur, deal with poverty in Ethiopia, and curb global warming on a groaning planet. Does the Gospel answer any of *their* questions?

In short, yes! *The Big Story* in the Bible makes sense of our struggles, and tells good news that impacts our existence right here and now, *individually, corporately, and cosmically*. In the words of N. T. Wright,

"The Gospel is that the crucified and risen Jesus is the Lord [master, or boss] of the world. And that His death and resurrection transform the world, and that transformation can happen to you. You, in turn, can be part of the transforming work."

¹ Note well that there is both a general and a particular sense in which the Biblical authors use "evangelist." In the general sense, all disciples of Christ are sent on a mission to preach the Gospel of the Kingdom and make disciples, and are thus "evangelists." In the particular sense, the Holy Spirit gifts some believers supernaturally as "evangelists"—at the same time giving evangelists as a gift to the church—that they may train and equip all believers to become more effective witnesses for Christ (cf. Ephesians 4:11-13). In this SIGN course, I am always referring to the general sense in which all believers are evangelists, heralding the good news of God's reign to a battle-weary world.

If you tell it as a story, your Sign Post should feature **five key phrases**.

1. ***Designed for Good***
2. ***Damaged by Evil***
3. ***Restored for Better***
4. ***Sent Together to Heal***
5. ***Set Everything Right***

(Practice them together a few times until it sticks—kudos for the first to memorize the lot!)

For all those sports buffs out there, remember the days of drills? In basketball it was the lay-up. *Dribble, dribble, outside step, inside step, jump, shoot, back-board tap, swish.*

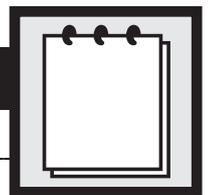
We'd literally repeat that drill dozens of times till we got it down pat. The strange thing was that virtually no-one ever had an open-court lay-up in a game situation. It was more fluid—a fake here, a pass there, then the shot. So why the drill? *Simple*. It was the building block for basketball. That same drill pattern came out in a million forms to fit the situation, but the same pattern was always present. And only when that skill was set could you spontaneously adapt and score.

There are no shortage of ways to tell the Gospel—the *Roman Road*, the *Bridge Illustration*, *Do verses Done* ... take your pick. But what I want you to learn is **The Big Story**. It's the best Sign Post I can offer for a world unaware of the Bible's back-story.² It's the basic pattern in any evangelistic encounter. Don't just watch it and nod. Take the time to memorize this approach *outside these small group sessions*—you'll deliver it next week. Perfect practice makes perfect, so work it over and over until you can draw the diagrams and tell it clearly off the cuff. And as you share it in real life, it will always look different—a question here, a tangent there, an analogy to back it up—but you'll find it a powerful way of pointing people to Jesus with a Sign that makes sense.

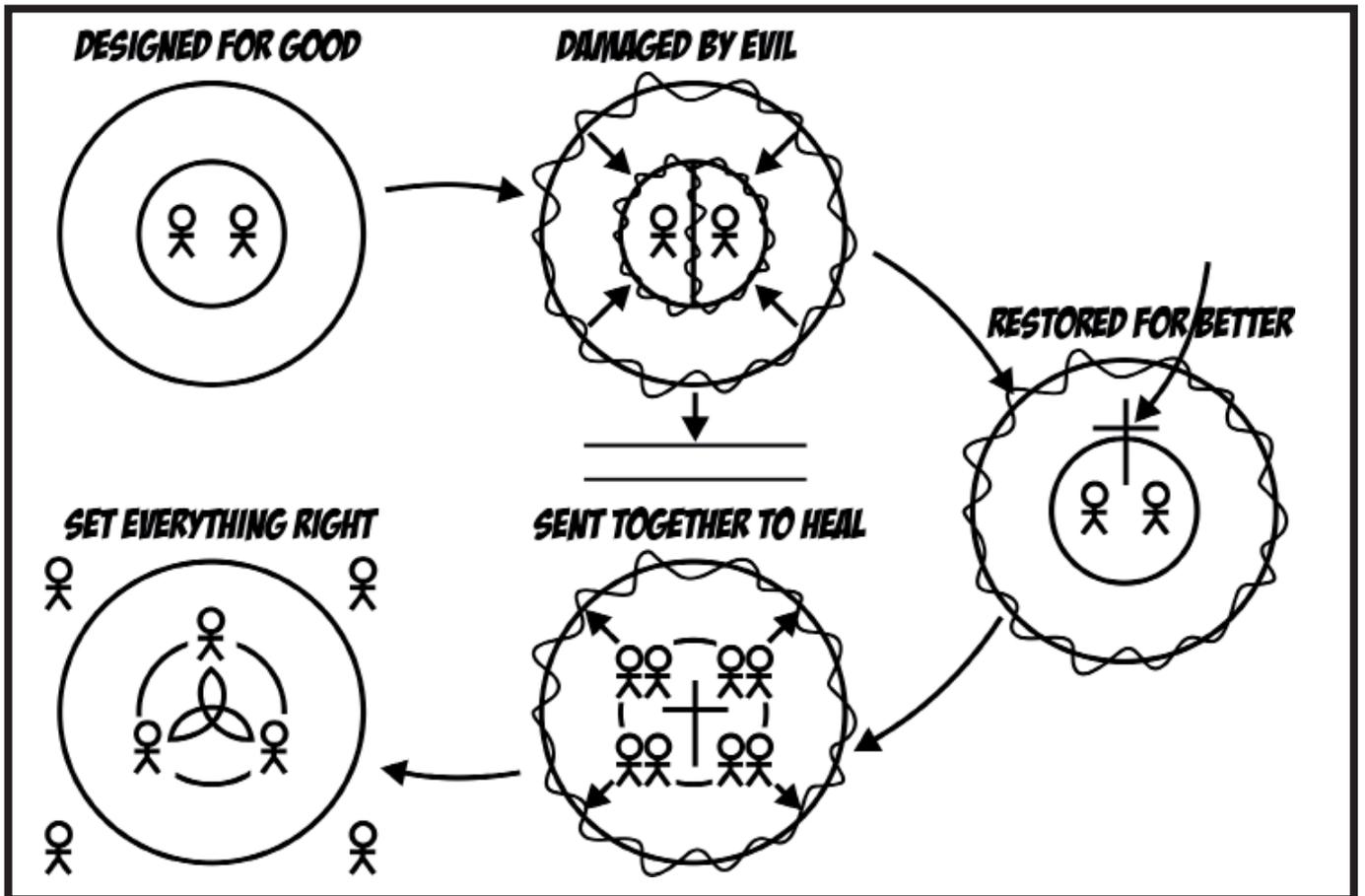
Watch this ... *The Big Story*

(<http://pathways.kbc.org.au/passing-it-on/>)

my thoughts



² This approach is an adaptation of James Choung's "*The Big Story*," from his book *True Story*. For our modified version on streaming-video, check out <http://pathways.kbc.org.au/passing-it-on/>.



Designed for good... we were made to love God, love each other, and cultivate this garden planet (Genesis 1-2; Job 7:17-18; Psalm 8:3-9; 19; 144:3-4; Matthew 22:37-40; John 1; Ephesians 2:8-10)

Damaged by evil... instead we've despised God, abused others, and vandalized our world—"Sin" pollutes, perverts and destroys life (Genesis 3; Isaiah 59; John 8:34; Romans 1:18-32; 3:23; 6:23)

Restored for better... we're forgiven, freed, healed, and transformed by Jesus' sacrifice (Isaiah 52:13-53:12; John 3:16; 10:10; Acts 4:12; Romans 5; Colossians 2:13-15; Hebrews 2:14-15)

Sent together to heal... Jesus has empowered us with God's Spirit to live the resurrection hope (Luke 4:18-19; 12:31-37; Matthew 20:25-28, 28:18-20; John 13:34-35; 15:5-27; 20:19-22; Acts 1:8)

Set everything right... Jesus will return to judge evil, deal with the powers, and set everything right—a transformed world (Psalm 96; 98; Isaiah 2:2-4; 65:17-25; Acts 17:31; Romans 2:1-16; 8:18-25; 1 Corinthians 15:21-58; Philippians 2:1-11; Revelation 11:18; 21:1-8)

*The Big Story is that **God designed us for good**, but through our bad choices we've been **damaged by evil**. But, through Jesus' life, death on the cross, and resurrection, we've been **restored for better**. If you're humble enough to admit to God that you fall short, and ask Him to forgive you for the wrong you've done, putting God first, then you can connect with life to the full—what God always intended for you. Then you can join other Christians, empowered by God, in being **sent together to heal a hurting world**, waiting for the day when Jesus will return and **set everything right** by judging all the evil in the world and restoring the whole universe.*

