

Session Notes: 02_SIGN language

Does My Sign Make Sense?

setting the scene



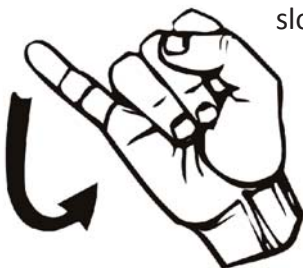
Common language makes communication possible. If you want a real conversation that makes sense, you have to deal with language barriers. But what if someone is deaf to your message? Enter my conundrum in a small Malaysian restaurant late last year. ...

So, picture this. I'm at a conference in Malaysia with nearly a thousand delegates from all around the world. Come meal time, I plop myself down at a table with total strangers, each apparently from different nations. Conversation can be tough at the best of times, but this was no ordinary conversation. I turn to the Mexican-looking-guy on the right and make some light chit-chat. ... No response. I try again. Still no response. No one else picked up on my social rejection, so I tried again with the Japanese guy on my left. "Are you enjoying the conference?" I asked. No response. Then came the "a-ha" moment. Of all the tables to choose, I'd joined those in the "deaf" track at the conference. "They can't hear you, you know!" piped in one of their friends, a professional signer who went with them everywhere.

That was language barrier number one. So this guy, Rob, got the ball rolling between me and Jun. It was slow going at first, but after a while—thanks to the translator—I discovered that Jun was a Pastor and Bible translator in Japan ... a rich conversation with an amazing guy ensued. It was beautiful watching how Rob took some pretty complicated concepts and put them into a concrete form with simple gesture, almost like a dance. (I could pick "Jesus" by the way Jun imitated nail-pierced palms.) His hands told stories that brought ideas like hope, struggle, desire, and love to life. His whole body was involved in telling the tale. By then, Ricardo on my right had twigged to our conversation. He wanted to join in too.

Enter language barrier number two. You see, Jun was using Japanese Sign Language, while Ricardo communicated with American Sign Language. (More than one Sign Language? News to me!) Thankfully Rob knew a bit of both, which made the transition easier. But then it happened—Jun and Ricardo,

slowly but surely, began their own conversation. *The Signs they each used were so tangible, so real and expressive, that it crossed the language barrier.* So there I am, sitting back in this little Malaysian diner, watching two hearing impaired guys from opposite sides of the world speak without so much as a word. *Beautiful.* It got me thinking: in a world that's deaf to religious jargon, only selectively hearing Christian themes, what's our common language? What does it take for our Sign to make sense?



Sunday's Sign ... The STORYTELLER

(Luke 4:14-21; 8:1-15; 13:18-21)

Remember the story of the sower who cast Gospel seeds on every soil looking for a fruitful response? *What's our seed? What's my message?* Evangelism isn't about offering our world the Church now and Heaven later. Instead, we must be storytellers who open ears, offering the Gospel of the Kingdom which sprouts now and is full grown later when Jesus returns and sets everything right. *But Kingdom stories follow Kingdom deeds.* A radical Christian life provokes questions to which the answer is the Gospel—we must tell our story walking, living and sharing God's reign. **So if you want to point people to Jesus, then be a STORY TELLER ...**

Forget about Heaven to tell good news now.

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

Your Sign Language can literally cross this language barrier. And the currency of common communication is the simple *story*. No wonder Jesus didn't say much apart from parables (Psalm 78:1-4; Matthew 13:1-17, 34). If people don't want to hear, fine. But, stories have a way of sneaking past our defences and opening our ears to conversations that can literally change our life. In this session we're going to explore how to tell *your* story as a way into *The Big Story*. Just like Sign Language, your "testimony" grounds all these big ideas like creation, fall, redemption, and new creation. Then we'll explore some tips for pointing people to Jesus that help your Sign make sense—building bridges, answering tough questions, and sharing helpful analogies.

Sharing Your Story and The Big Story

Okay, so chances are you won't get the golden opportunity to share the whole Gospel story in one hit. Even then, you'll probably only get a couple of minutes of sustained attention to share anything at all. *So what to say?*

Probably the best place to start is to **ask good questions** to get to know the person you're talking to, and **listen** for points that connect their story to this big story ... maybe it's through a worry they have, or a need, or a desire for life to be different or better. Or maybe it's some kind of question about whether God even exists, or what He's like, or why it matters. What ever it is, look for **bridges** from where they're at to *The Big Story*. The best way to make this transition is to connect their story to your story ... **your testimony**.



Hopefully you've done this kind of thing before, but a testimony is simply sharing

What your life was like
before you accepted Christ

+

How you came to ask Jesus into your life

+

How your life has changed.

It centres around one question: **"What makes Jesus good news for me?"**

"I was striving . . . but now I'm grateful."

"I was self-destructive . . . but now I'm healthy."

"Guilty . . . but now liberated."

"Fear-stricken . . . but now confident."

"Despairing . . . but now hopeful." ⁴

⁴ Hybels, *Walk Across the Room*, p. 126.

Can you see *The Big Story* playing out again, in your own life? You were **designed for good**, but turned away from God; in the process you were **damaged by evil**. The story doesn't finish there, though. The turning point was when you encountered Jesus. Through admitting your failures to God and centring your life on the Saviour who died for your wrongdoing and rose again in victory, you have been **restored for better**. Now, in the power of His Spirit, and as part of a community of Jesus' followers, you've increasingly found what God created you for, **sent together with others to help heal a hurting world**. The final chapter of your story is the hopeful anticipation that just as Jesus rose from the dead, one day God will resurrect the whole cosmos and you with it, dealing with all evil and **setting everything right**—a world of peace and prosperity where God, humanity, and nature sing in harmony. Stories need a happy ending, as eternity is hidden in our hearts.

Be real. Be natural. Be brief. (Or in Bill Hybels' words, *avoid long-windedness, fuzziness, religioneese, and superiority*—this is a story of God's grace, not how good you are!) As you practice this, you can find different angles from which to share your life to better connect with another ... e.g., the *love* angle, the *truth* angle, a *hard-time-I-went-through* angle, and so on.

The beauty of a testimony is that, because it's *your story*, the other person can't really argue with it. Worst case scenario, they may think it's irrelevant to them, or say, "Well, I'm happy for you ... it's just not for me." But if you've done a good job listening, then it should be relevant for them too. In essence, you're saying, "This story of how God transformed me ... He can do this for you too, if you let Him." You're offering them something good, something helpful, something true. Don't be shy.

In light of God's love, sharing with others is a privilege. This is our identity: "But you are God's chosen and special people. You are a group of royal priests and a holy nation. *God has brought you out of darkness into his marvellous light. Now you must tell all the wonderful things that he has done*" (1 Peter 2:9). As it says in Psalm 107, "Oh, thank GOD—He's so good! His love never runs out. *All of you set free by GOD, tell the world! Tell how he freed you from oppression*" (vv. 1-2).

Tips for More Effective Signing

So, you've got *The Big Story* clear in your head, and you're looking for ways to share something of your own journey. But there are still so many language barriers to cross.

The following three tips offer common language to communicate the Gospel. Like Sign Language, they make Christ and His Kingdom tangible by taking big concepts and expressing them in simple actions and words that relate to our everyday lives. If you want to point people to Jesus, it helps to **build bridges, answer tough questions, and share helpful analogies.**

Tip #1 Building Bridges

Imagine this. You've just joined an indoor soccer team for a bit of exercise and socializing. One of your new team mates, Ben, gets chatting with you and seems like a pretty decent guy. So, you decide to catch up again mid-week just to chill out and get to know him better—you can never have too many friends, right? So there you are, having a decent time, when the conversation takes a weird turn. Ben starts to share how life has really picked up for him since joining a business co-operative. You politely ask a couple of questions, but half-an-hour later he's pressuring you to buy products and join the network. You get more direct, but he doesn't take a hint, so you make an excuse to leave early and get out of there. Now, you're more gracious than the average person, so you want to give this potential friendship another shot. But come soccer night, Ben virtually ignores you and moves onto "networking" with other team members. How do you feel? Is this business attractive now?

Connect the dots! Ever seen this (or done this) with non-Christians? What would Jesus do?

Love. Love. Love. Jesus didn't form friendships just to groom someone for the Gospel, and then dump them when they didn't care. This isn't an excuse to hold back from sharing—pointing people to Jesus is the fullest expression of love, as it offers reconciliation with God and abundant life. *But if your words come without loving deeds—through listening and serving—then they won't care how much you know until they know how much you care.* Radical love prompts the kind of questions that give you an “in” to share. When the time comes and the Holy Spirit nudges you to talk, if they're not interested, this is not an easy out to end a “friendship.” The light you shine might turn them away, but your call is to love, love, love (Matthew 19:16-22; John 3:16-21).

There's a second part to building bridges. We need **conversational bridges** that open up opportunities to point people to Jesus. “Religion” is taboo in our society, so Hell might literally freeze over before you hear, “Wow, you're a Christian! Tell me, Why Jesus is good news for you?” *You need to take some risks.* Send out some conversational feelers (salting the conversation, Colossians 4:5-6) that **shift the conversation from the everyday to eternal matters.**

Build rapport. Ask questions. Listen to their story and note their *frustrations, hopes, desires, and beliefs*—as the Kingdom is God's total answer to our total need (physical, spiritual, social, political, environmental), you'll always find a way in to share some of *your story*, tying it to *The Big Story*. Trust that the Spirit is at work and share what fits the conversation ... you don't have to take every conversation to the foot of the cross. Bridging opportunities need to be genuine, honest, and open. And if your relational bridge is strong enough, you might be able to go deeper without a natural bridge: *“Hey, this is out of the blue, but what do you make of the whole ‘God’ thing?”*

Tip #2 Answering Tough Questions

Few things freak us out more than trying to point someone to Jesus, only to be stumped by their really tough questions in return...

Kinda' arrogant to think only your religion is true, isn't it?

A loving God who sends people to Hell just 'coz they haven't heard?

Why trust a book made up by old dead dudes?

But Christianity is so harsh to women and gays!

Why doesn't God just feed the starving Africans?

And what about the dinosaurs?

Obviously in a three week course like SIGN, we're short on time to give specific answers. So instead, here are a few helps.

(1) As humans, we're finite and fallen, limited and biased, so every belief takes some measure of *faith*. That is, you've got to *trust something or someone*—whether your senses, someone else's data, or a recognized “authority,” be it your dad, Richard Dawkins, or the Decalogue. And when it comes to authority—especially about stuff that science *can't* test, like the origin and meaning of life, knowing right from wrong, and what happens when we die—there is no higher authority than God. We've got good reason to believe that God exists—it makes sense of phenomena like science, morality, consciousness, memory, love, beauty, and the unbreakable “religiousness” of humanity—so this isn't some blind appeal to authority. But more than God just “being there,” *He is not silent*. God has reached out to us, telling us things we could never work out for ourselves. Each of us has experienced God through Jesus. And even though we could be mistaken in how we interpret our experiences, *it is warranted to trust what you have seen, tasted, and felt* (Psalm 34:8; John 7:17; 1 Peter 1:3-9; 1 John 1:1-4).

(2) Now, just as an atheist can't prove that God doesn't exist, we can't *prove* beyond a reasonable doubt that all of what we believe is true. But that doesn't mean it is unreasonable. Faith has its reasons, and the reasons point to Jesus as the Christ (Luke 1:1-4; John 20:30-31; 21:24-25; 1 Corinthians 15:1-8; 2 Peter 1:16-21). So, if someone's asking a genuine and good question, it deserves a good answer. *There is lots of excellent evidence that makes it reasonable to believe as you do—even if you don't know it!—so you don't need to be afraid of facing questions and doubts head on.* Faith is not the absence of evidence. Rather, it's following the evidence where it leads, and then living it boldly even when you can't be totally confident. Why not start with *your own questions*, and do some research (1 Peter 3:15-17). **In Appendix_02 you'll find links to some of the best books to begin with** (especially Tim Keller's *The Reason for God*), **and a resource of "Quick Answers to Tough Questions" from a previous talk a few of us gave called "Caught Out."**

(3) So, here's a good process. Find out what their key sticking point is—why they don't believe in God, or follow Jesus. Keep asking questions to clarify and see what they think. (Many people objecting to Christianity haven't researched their claims ... often they will make some naked assertion with few reasons to back it up, so questions are helpful with this.) Try these questions on:

1. What do you mean by that? (*explain yourself, define your terms and beliefs*)
2. How do you know that's true? (what are your *reasons* for believing that)
3. Where'd you get your information? (what's your *source*, and can you trust it)
4. What if you're wrong? (what are the *consequences* of your beliefs if untrue)

If you don't know the answer to what they're asking, say so. This doesn't mean you're stupid to believe as you do. You may have other good reasons to believe—like your testimony, that God has changed your life. Also, don't follow too many rabbit trails. Take *evolution*, for instance. The key question is *not* whether the Earth is 10,000 years old or 4.2 billion years. It's more important to consider whether God exists or not—regardless of whether he used evolution, or spontaneously created the whole thing. **Try and bring the focus back to Jesus ... His life, death, resurrection.** Same with *other religions*. Be honest: none of us is an expert on Christianity, let alone every belief system! But we think with Jesus we're onto a pretty sure thing ... and no one else in the history of humanity can claim to have conquered death. So keep first things first.

Tip #3: Sharing Helpful Analogies

Okay, we've covered a lot of ground tonight. Last topic for the night: **helpful analogies**. As you share *The Big Story*, you're sure to get some kick back. To every question or objection blocking their ears to the Gospel, there's usually a pretty simple analogy that starts with something familiar and concrete, making sense of what you're trying to explain.

Following are two totally overdone examples (don't share all these analogies in one hit!), but it should give you an idea of what I'm talking about! (*Read this later if you're tight on time.*)

"Isn't it kind of arbitrary for God to draw a line around what we can and can't do, making a big list of rules to follow?" (i.e., What is "sin" and why should I believe we're "damaged by evil"?)

>> Are all "rules" arbitrary? Imagine a car manufacturer designs a car to run on premium unleaded. "How intolerant and restrictive," you think ... "I'll fill up with sugar and water!" See the problem? Things break when you ignore the maker's intent. God made us to run on Him, which is why our hearts are restless until they find their home in God. We're designed to love God, love others, and cultivate the Earth to make it more fruitful. This is the *form* that protects *freedom* so we can live a life that works right as it's in tune with God's design. This form is like the banks of a river that channels a raging torrent to refresh a dry land, rather than bring a devastating flood.

Your desires bring life when channelled in God’s form. “Sin” *isn’t* the breaking of arbitrary rules; sin *is* what it looks like when we miss the mark of what we were made to be and do. That’s why sin brings death. Sin is building the core of our identity, the essence of who we are, on something other than God. It often takes a good thing and makes it an ultimate thing. And we’ve put all our weight on something other than God—a career, a relationship, money—but it can’t support our expectations. When our idol breaks, we break too. That’s why Jesus came. He shows us a better way, and changes our heart if we let Him, so we naturally desire what brings life rather than death.

“Why doesn’t God just forgive everyone, without all this sacrifice business? And why do I need to put Jesus at the centre of my life?” (i.e., Why is Jesus necessary to be “restored for better”?)

>> Forgiveness may be freely offered, but is it ever free for the one forgiving? Imagine a kid took a joy ride in his dad’s car and smashed it up real good. Should the dad forgive his son? Now, if he forgives him, does the car automatically fix itself? And if the kid can’t afford to pay, who picks up the tab? So forgiveness is free, but it’s not cheap. Now, what does it cost to fix up the mess we’ve made of God’s good Earth? Instead of loving God, loving others, and cultivating the Earth, we’ve despised God, abused each other, and vandalized the world. The blood of the world is on all our hands. And this damage is not just in what we do. It starts with what we think: our motives. Not only are we each broken, but we break. Remember the “Black Saturday” Bushfires of 2009, which burned up thousands of houses, millions of acres, and killed nearly 200 people? Should someone pay? So what does it cost to pay for the wrong I’ve done, and the wrong you’ve done? I don’t fully understand how it works, but when we tell the Maker of life to get lost, and then turn our backs on Him to deface His creation, our life begins to die. God tells us in the Bible that the cost of sin is death, and it’s only by the spilling of blood that it can be made right. Gruesome, I know, but necessary. So Jesus stepped in and paid the price for us. When we put God’s Son at the centre of our life, all our concerns fall into place and orbit the way they’re supposed to.

Okay, get the picture?

💬 What analogies have you found most helpful while pointing people to Jesus? Jot some notes.

my thoughts

