

Why We Don't Preach in Our Churches: Conversational Bible Teaching¹

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When I finished Bible school I had thirty-six sermons. I had learned these topics during my time of training from the teachers there. These were all sermons which I knew I could preach. After I left the Bible School I began working as an assistant pastor in a church where I did a number of things including preaching all of my thirty-six sermons. When I had preached my last sermon I was done. That was it; I was finished. I didn't have anything else to say because I did not know how to come up with new topics.

It had also become more and more difficult for me to preach. I noticed that while I was preaching some people in the congregation would stare up into the ceiling. Some others would sit and just close their eyes. There were others who would chat the whole time with their neighbors. What was I as the preacher supposed to do? I was just supposed to keep on preaching. So I stood there and I talked on and on and on until I was finished.

There was once a preacher who wore a goatee. One day he preached what he thought was a very powerful sermon. One elderly woman seemed to be so especially touched by his words that she began to cry. The more powerfully he preached the more the tears just rolled down her cheeks. Finally at the end of the sermon she came forward, sobbing as she made her way up to the pulpit. "Grandma," the preacher asked, "Have you been convicted? Have you come to confess an area of sin in your life?" "No, it's not that" she answered, "It's just that as your chin bobbed up and down I kept thinking of my goat that died this morning."

When we preach we have no way of knowing what is really going on inside of the listener's head. After I finished preaching all my sermons with that pastor I came to work with Jim Gustafson³ and Tongpan⁴. I started preaching my thirty-six sermons again. All of us preached in those days. Jim preached, I preached, Tongpan preached. Tongpan was a first class preacher. He could really keep people's attention.

One day, while I was still doing a lot of preaching, a grandmother came up to me and asked me after the service, "When will this Paulo⁵ come to visit us?" She said she had heard me often refer to him as an authoritative teacher: "Paulo says this..." and "Paulo says that..." and "According to Paulo I believe such and such..."⁶ She had no concept of the fact that Paulo was dead and gone or when he had lived. She didn't know what an apostle was! There was no teaching about that (in my sermon). She thought that Paulo was just another missionary from another country and she was wondering when she would get the chance to hear him firsthand.

That was when I said to myself, "This isn't working." I stopped preaching monologue. I changed and started teaching by asking questions. That was the beginning for me of conversational Bible teaching.

There is only one way to find out what people are thinking and that is by asking them. I studied with Dr. Chuck Kraft from Fuller Seminary⁷. He said that two people could look in the same direction at the same thing but view things entirely different (Kraft 1996:51ff). Do you agree with that? Let's do an experiment. You are all looking this direction at me. Some of

you will see my balding head. Some will see notice my mouth. Some of you are looking at my ears. Why is that? Everyone is interested in different things. No one sees things exactly as another person does. So if I stand up here and preach monologue people will be looking and thinking all kinds of scattered thoughts. No one will be thinking the same as another. They may never be following the point of what is being said.

People don't understand the same word or concept in the same way either. Let's use a simple example: Love. When Thai people hear this do you think they understand the same way? When they hear, "For God so loved the world he gave his only begotten son that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life " does everyone understand this the same way? No - each person has his or her own way of thinking about love - especially Thai people.

The kind of love mentioned here in the Bible is agape love. Agape love doesn't exist among people. Look as far as you want and you won't find it. Agape love means loving your enemy, loving the unlovely, and even loving the evil person. When Thai people hear that God loves us they ask themselves, "What does God want from me?" Because most Thai people when they hear the word "love" think of eros in the Greek. This is sexual desire, the selfish desiring kind of love that wants for its own appetite. I love you so you love me. If you don't love me I won't love you. If God loves me I must love him. This has caused many to misunderstand that if God loves me I must do good so that God will continue to love me.

What is the best way of finding out if people are following your point or not? You have to ask them! Use questions such as, "Do you understand what I just said?" or "Did I explain myself clearly?" This is especially important if you are working with village church members⁸. Village people do not like to ask questions.

Although I am a Thai, I see myself as a person of divided cultural values in regards to this. I have always had a problem with Thai teachers. How do Thai teachers teach? They teach memorization and students are taught to parrot back the answers. They do not allow students to ask questions. But what do I like to do? I love to ask questions. I can't hold myself back. If I don't understand something I ask a question. If a student asks questions of a Thai teacher what does the Thai teacher think? They think you don't trust them, that you are just trying to test them to see if they know anything. They feel that to question them is to undermine their authority. Actually I never intend this. I am genuinely interesting in learning so I ask lots of question.

When I was a student I got lots of "E's" in my subjects. Do you know what "E" in the Thai grading system means? "E" does not stand for "excellent". In the Thai system the grading goes "A, B, C, D, E." "E" means failure. I got lots of "E's." Asking questions caused me lots of problems.

But when we teach the Bible we encourage people to ask lots of questions. We don't preach at people. We want to know what people are thinking and make sure we are all following the same point. If you visit our churches you might be shocked to see what happens. During the Bible teaching time the church members are all asking questions as well as the discussion leader. No one person does all the talking. Everyone talks.

I was asked to speak at a Lutheran group and it just about killed me. This group was not used to the style of conversational Bible discussion. No matter how hard I tried to ask people what

they understood no one would ever answer! They were thinking to themselves, "What kind of a teacher is this that asks us questions? He is supposed to know and then tell us!" Why do you think no one ever dared to answer me? They were afraid their answers would be wrong.

What is most important to us as Thai people⁹? Face. Saving face. Looking good in the eyes of others. What happens when we answer incorrectly? We break out into a sweat, our cheeks get red and we feel so stupid.¹⁰ How we think the people around are viewing us is very significant to Thai people. We are always conscious of the others present and are concerned about what we think they are thinking about us, isn't this true? How we look to them is very important. What do people do when we answer incorrectly? They smile, they laugh, and they might make some quiet disparaging remarks. But afterwards what are they saying? "What an idiot! He didn't even know how to answer that simple question!" With attitudes like this it is no surprise that people are not willing to answer questions aloud.

Foreign teachers have said that Thai students are the easiest in the world to teach. Why is this? The students always smile and never have any questions. This is because the foreign teacher just talks and talks. As he writes on the board he can't see the Thai students looking confused at each other behind his back so he keeps on talking. Since there are never any questions he just keeps on talking. Even if he asks them they may not be willing to admit they have a question, since they don't want to make him feel bad and they don't want to look stupid.

How do we encourage people to ask questions in the church so they can understand the Bible? In the church we work with one person as the discussion leader. First we have to select a passage. The leader has to choose the topic. The gospels are easy and enjoyable for villagers to discuss because they are stories. The epistles are harder but they can be discussed also. Once a passage is selected that person will have need to prepare questions.

Suppose, as an example, I wanted to study the story in Luke 15:11-31. For those who are long time Christians you won't need to open to the passage. You all know the story of the Prodigal son. You've heard it hundreds of times, the youngest son leaves with all the money, goes partying everywhere until he's ruined and then he comes back home again. Suppose we are going to teach this passage. The discussion leader must prepare beforehand. At first they won't know how to do this. They must learn how to prepare questions. Why must they do this? What keeps conversation flowing? Questions. Just as I am asking you so the group leader will ask the group. Don't just talk by yourself. Ask the group and let the church members respond. When it comes to the time of worship he (or she) will have the church members read the passage aloud. This starts to get people speaking out loud.

After this the leader will then ask the question what is the main focus of this passage? Thai people do not know how to find the main focus of a passage. Foreigners don't always get the point either. I remember one missionary came and visited us from Chiang Mai and he studied this passage together with us during our time of worship. At the end he was crying because he said he had never seen the main point of this passage before.

Back to Luke 15. We will use the three main characters from this story as the basis of questions. First, the son, second, the father, third, the elder brother. Some simple questions are: Who is the son? Who is the father? The father is God. We will see agape love clearly in this passage. Who is the elder son? The good Christian. Who is the most important figure in

this story? The father - usually this is not what people think. God is the central figure of the story and all of us as believers tend to be like the elder brother.

This reminds me of a situation in a church when I was a young pastor. There was woman in the church who had a young lover but she already had a husband. All the Christians in the church were outraged. They were all Pharisees. They had her sit in the middle and came together to tell her how wrong she was and to punish her. I went home that night thinking, "I am a real Pharisee." I went back to this passage. I realized that I was no different. I am married but I have looked in lust at other women. I had to go back and confess my sins to others. Usually the teachers don't share when they are wrong.

When we describe this story we need to look at each character, ask the main point, ask for descriptions of each character - ask lots of questions. Finally, we ask application questions. Who are you in this story? Are you the younger son? Do you need to come home? Are you the father? Can you forgive? Are you the older brother who thinks he is good already? This way the villagers will go home remembering what they have learned. We have to teach the ability to find the main point of a passage. We have to ask, "In our own lives how are we in comparison to this passage?" Changes come from God's own power, not our own power to try to change.

Using this conversational method you never run out of passages to teach. We can continue from one verse to the next, following one after another, building upon the foundation. By asking questions people can learn together, both the leader and the church members. We grow and share and learn what is on each other's hearts.

Endnotes:

1. This topic was originally given as a seminar at the Isaan Intensive Conference held May 14-17, 2001 in Udon Thani, Thailand.
2. Rev. Banpote Wechkama is a native Isaan born in what is now Yasothon Province. He has been working with the organization that mothered the Thailand Covenant church for thirty years.
3. Jim and Joan Gustafson began working in northeast Thailand as missionaries in 1971.
4. Tongpan Phrommedda
5. Paulo is the spelling in the Thai Bible for the name of the Apostle Paul.
6. This could also be complicated by the fact that Thai verbs do not have tenses to indicate past, present or future occurrence. These details come from the context which would be easy to miss in a slow moving sermon if the mind was wandering.
7. Dr. Charles H. Kraft is Professor of Anthropology at the School of World Mission, Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, California.
8. The majority of churches with which the Thailand Covenant Church works are in rural Isaan village settings.
9. As he asked this question the speaker circled his face with his finger.
10. The literal phrase is the "face breaks apart into pieces."

Methodology Used in Conversational Bible Discussion:

- I. Choose the passage to be taught
 - 1.1 Choose a chapter
 - 1.2 Choose a story
 - 1.3 Choose a book
- II. Title the passage to be taught. Examples:

- 2.1 Mt. 25:14-30 The servant with the master's money
- 2.2 Luke 10:25-37 The good Samaritan
- 2.3 Luke 15:11-32 The Prodigal Son
- 2.4 Romans 1:16-17 The Power of the Gospel
- III. Determine the purpose of the passage
 - 3.1 General purposes are for information
 - 3.2 Specific purposes are for active practice - doing something
- IV. State the details of the passage
 - 4.1 Be able to tell the story in your own words
 - 4.2 Don't use "Bible vocabulary" or just re-read it.
- V. Give specific examples drawing from the passage
 - 5.1 Examples can come from scripture
 - 5.2 Examples can come from actual life experiences
 - 5.3 Examples can come from elsewhere: fables, gossip, folk tales
- VI. Evaluate and discuss together
 - 6.1 Evaluate through the use of observation questions
 - 6.2 Evaluate through asking general test questions
- VII. Application Questions
 - 7.1 Applications questions must come out of the study of the passage
 - 7.2 Applications questions must fit into the lifestyles of those studying