
Lost in Translation

Observations on Bringing Christ to the Christless through Counseling 1 Thessalonians 1:2 – 2:16

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Introduction

Some of you, perhaps, have seen the 2003 Bill Murray movie, *Lost in Translation*. It's a movie about two individuals who are essentially lost in the journey of their lives. Their morality is wandering, their sense of purpose is wandering, their identity is wandering... everything is adrift. And this is all set against a cross-cultural experience in which both characters find themselves as Americans travelling in Japan and experiencing all the disconnects and misunderstandings that being in a foreign country can bring. I bring this movie to mind because when we come to the topic we are discussing tonight, I believe that many Christians and would be biblical counselors are in danger of finding themselves "lost in translation." And just as it was for Bill Murray and Scarlet Johansson, the "lostness," if you will, is two-fold.

But a brief interjection before I go on: When I use the term "biblical counselor" this evening, I'm not referring to just those who have had specific education. I am referring to any Christian who would seek to bring all of the Word and all of Christ's wisdom to bear upon the practical issues of living. I do however, want to especially target those are graduating tonight because I believe in some ways that your rapid acquisition of knowledge, may put you at risk for stumbling when putting your knowledge to use in non-church settings.

Back to being lost in translation. We can get lost in two ways. First, we may be unclear about the *role or purpose* of biblical counseling when it comes to working with unbelievers in a secular context, such as at work or in a social setting with non-Christian friends. Second, we have difficulty *speaking into unbelievers lives* because we cannot effectively bridge the very real cultural gap that exists between us and them. Therefore, as we work to "translate" the wisdom of Christ into language that they can understand, we somehow lose the meaning along the way. Our interpretation fails. We get off track, adrift, sideways, and our potential ministry is hurt... we become lost in translation.

Where the Lord Has Allowed Me to Serve (and the careful work of translation)

These observations are based on experiences from my own life where the maze of criss-crosses between secular and sacred, psychology and theology, and wisdom and science are sometimes overwhelming and disorienting. By training, I am what is called a psychiatric mental health nurse. There was a time when my day to day job was caring around the clock for persons with diagnoses like depression with psychosis, type 1 bipolar manic phase, paranoid schizophrenia, or borderline personality disorder. I worked with many people who were suicidal, addicted to drugs or alcohol, violent, unstable, emotionally paralyzed, and so

on. A little later I moved into teaching about psychiatric mental health nursing at Christian university. There I was responsible for both the classroom content and taking students to clinical settings. For the last several years I have not functioned in the clinical setting. Instead, I am heavily engaged as a researcher in trying to understand the relationship between being spiritual or religious and certain emotional extremes, like depression and anxiety, and certain risky behaviors like alcohol abuse and suicidality. I carry this work out with funding from *non-religious* institutions at a *public* university and regularly publish and present to *secular* audiences. Somewhere in the midst of all this, I learned of and became committed to the truth that the Bible speaks to *all* of life and that in Christ *alone* can viable solutions to our greatest problems be found. I also became a pastor here at the Chapel and have been functioning as a non-staff elder for the past five years.

Given these many intersections of roles, I find myself regularly thinking through what it means to be a Christian in the world. Even more specifically, what it means to be committed to Bible truths about God, about people, and about the gospel, while at the same time, as a university researcher and professor, being in the position of creating and disseminating knowledge for a secular audience.

And this brings us to our [Lost in Translation Danger #1: We don't realize we are in a foreign land](#). That is, you may not understand that Bible truth could very well come across as gibberish to the unbeliever living in a largely unchurched world. Just as Paul informs us, "[For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing...](#)"¹ Here is a very common and simple case in point. My colleague says to me, "My husband is an ###. He refuses to relocate so that I can make a new job as a VP." I say, "Huh, sounds like you have an idol." Or another colleague says, "Yah, but didn't they like kill and sacrifice animals in the Old Testament?" I say, "Sure, but to completely understand that, you have to understand it in terms of redemptive history." I'm speaking a different language at best, or intentionally bringing the conversation to an end by running to obscure language, at worst, because I don't really have an answer. But I don't realize it. The problem can become far more difficult when you start discussing the heart, or lusts and lies, or the gospel. We forget to take into account the fact that we are aliens and ambassadors. We may even become like the caricature of the ugly American: highly offensive, but completely unaware because we assume everyone knows what we know or speaks the language we speak. The Apostle Paul understood this well, and one clear example is the Acts record of his speech at the Areopagus (Acts 17). But that is not the only record we have of Paul interacting with an unbelieving and secular world.

This brings us to our text for this evening, 1 Thessalonians 1:2-2:16. I hope to move through these verses at the observational level with you in a way that allows us to continue to address these "Lost in Translation Dangers." In total, we'll move through 6 dangers. More importantly, however, we'll note the nature of Paul and colleagues work as they ministered to the Thessalonians – a secular and ungodly group of people... just like the world we live in today.

¹ 1 Corinthians 1:18.

Observations & Applications from Paul & Co. Work Among the Thessalonians

There are many, many, passages you could go to in the New Testament to discuss how a Christian functions in a secular setting, most of Acts and a majority of the Epistles deal directly and indirectly with this issue. After all, the focus of much of the early church's ministry was on taking the gospel to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth – and indeed all of these places were filled with unbelievers. To say that we don't have much biblical data to help us deal with this issue of Christians in and among the world is silly. There is plenty. If this is true, then why does the issue seem to become less clear when we begin talking about biblical counseling? Why do people get stuck asking the question, should we counsel unbelievers? This brings us to [Lost in Translation Danger #2: We separate the counsel from the gospel, either in theory or practice](#). If we were to put this "danger" more directly, and perhaps crassly, we could say, "It's [counseling] evangelism stupid."

You see, there is no biblical category for counseling ministry to an unbeliever that is not evangelistic. So let's be clear here: **When working with an unbeliever, some evangelism will involve counseling, but all counseling will involve evangelism.** You never see Paul or Christ in the New Testament interacting with unbelievers in a manner that was not centered around the gospel and its closely related truths. In fact, what you do see is both Christ and Paul condemning harshly those who would bring Christless counsel to anyone. In Matthew 23 Christ roundly rejects the Pharisees' behavior-based religion which had cut the necessity of the heart renewal completely out of God's plan. Paul, similarly, in Galatians decries those who would deliver any message that would distort the truth of the Christ-centered gospel, he says, *"I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel... let him [who delivers the false gospel] be accursed"*² He then later gives more detail – the Galatians were beginning to incorporate certain "practices" in to the gospel. They were turning away from Christ for a "form" of godliness. Undoubtedly, these false teachers gave good sounding advice and teaching – but they did not give the gospel.

In the end, Paul and Christ are saying the same thing. There is no value in "teaching" godliness (or biblical counsel) apart from Christ and his gospel. It merely adds up to legalism which Christ stated creates *"...[children] of hell..."*³ This is true when speaking to believers in the church, and when speaking to unbelievers outside the church. So, let us commit to never divorcing our counsel from the gospel, whether speaking to believers or unbelievers. To help unbelievers live better, without helping them to see Christ, is to help them to hell. Give biblical counsel to an unbeliever? Absolutely. But never, never, without the Christ-centered gospel front and center.

² Galatians 1:6, 9

³ Matthew 23:15

A Guiding Vision of God’s Power to Transform (1:2-10)

Let’s move into the passage for tonight. *[Read 1:2-10]*. There are really only three main points I want to make from this passage tonight and the first one is very clear in these eight verses: God radically changes the lives of people – first through salvation and then through transformation. Make sure that you keep the context before you here clear – before Paul arrived in Thessalonica there were likely none or very few believers there. Yet Paul uses phrases like, *“your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope...”* or *“we know... that he has chosen you because our gospel came to you not only in word but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction.”* Or *“so that you became an example to all believers...”* or *“...your faith in God has gone forth everywhere...”* or *“how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God...”* We can’t help but be confronted by the reality of radical change in the hearts and lives of these people in a way that was externally obvious and supernaturally driven.

What do I mean by that? Well, you’ll see that in verse 7 the Thessalonians had become an example to those around them. So much so, that word spread of not only their conversion, but their imitation of godliness. There was objective change. There was a turning from other idols (ruling beliefs and desires) to the one true and living God. Beloved, if that is not what biblical counseling is about, then it is about nothing. But what does Paul note as the source or mechanisms of change? A talk show host? A famous pop-culture book? A new therapy or drug? No. It was the *“gospel... in word ...in power ...and in the Holy Spirit.”* All the same tools available to us today in the same force and quantity that they were available to Paul.

So as biblical counselors moving into the lives of unsaved people in a secular culture, where do we tend to get lost in translation? [Lost in Translation Danger #3: We disbelieve God’s power to change the ungodly.](#) We have forgotten, or stopped believing, or given up on what is so clearly and beautifully presented here with the Thessalonians. We are tempted to give “good” advice, recommend “good books,” and offer prayer for the unbeliever, but we stop short of gospel in word, in power, and in the Holy Spirit. We just haven’t seen enough transformation to be convinced that God is able or interested. Somewhere along the way, Romans 1:16, *“For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes...”* has become a memory verse instead of an amazing verse. God changes lives through salvation and transformation. This is the clear message of the New Testament, it is the clear message of the people here at the Chapel, and I pray that it is the clear message of your life. *[example]*

Thus we must approach unbelievers with confidence that God can and will change even the “most messed up life” into a trophy for his grace. For inspiration, check the mirror.

A Defining Shape to the Counselor’s Character and Work (2:1-12)

We must hurry on, so let’s read together Thessalonians 2:1-12 *[Read]*. In this passage we see Paul describing the nature of his work among the Thessalonians. Now there is a

context here that helps us to understand much of what Paul is speaking about and to glean more of that I commend to you the reading of Acts 17. For tonight, I want simply to observe *how* Paul was among the Thessalonians. First, Paul and his coworkers were gentle, caring, affectionate, and went so far as to share their own lives, their selves, with the Thessalonians even as they shared the gospel. Paul *genuinely loved* the unbelievers that he ministered to. [Lost in Translation Danger #4: We speak the truth, but without love.](#) I believe that this is probably one of the greatest risks of the Christian culture bubbles that have sprung up. By “bubbles” I mean, Christian politics exemplified in the religious right, Christian high schools and colleges, Christian bookstores, Christian music, Christian cruises, Christian movies, Christian TV stations, etc. These things engender a “we versus them” mentality. Unbelievers do not become a target of our affection and love, they become those whom we hide our children from. Our Christianity becomes about us and preservation of our culture – not about Christ’s glory and extending it throughout the world. Do not let anyone tell you that there is not a way to be in the world but not of the world, that you must be either be a strident conservative fundamentalist or a compromising emergent. Paul *gave himself* to those he engaged with gospel ministry in Thessalonica. Christ was *a friend of sinners* for the sake of the gospel. Paul endured great suffering at the hands of unbelievers for the sake of the gospel. How many of us, I wonder, have so given ourselves to the gospel ministry of unbelievers that we find ourselves, not compromising for them, but affectionate toward them?

It is much easier to simply judge and condemn and argue and shun and huddle and attack and repeat political arguments the radio and the internet (not the Bible) has taught you. Beloved, that is not what being a Christian or a biblical counselor is about. You must stand at the ready to love through your gospel ministry lest you discredit the gospel itself. Counselor, you must be ready to get out from behind the desk and wade into the mess of life with your counselee. Which brings us to our next point.

A second characteristic of Paul’s manner of being among the Thessalonians was his unassailable integrity. Paul worked hard, day and night, to be certain that his message would not be tainted by his own actions and behavior. If you read through these verses, you can see that Paul was able to say with a clear conscience before God that his ministry was not stained by: fickleness, lack of courage, deceptiveness, inaccuracy, people-pleasing, a need to be thought of well, self-gain, freeloading, or misconduct. Does this mean Paul was never accused of wrong doing, or never smeared, or never Public Enemy #1? It does not, for surely he was all of those things. What it does mean, however, is that before those who had ears to hear and eyes to see, Paul never put a stumbling block by his own actions or attitudes.

How big of an issue is this these days? It is really big. I would argue that saying something like “I’m a Christian” to an unbeliever who does not know you does absolutely nothing to secure your standing before them. In fact, it may hurt it. People often could care less what you say you are. It is what you do and how the testimony of your life plays out before them. Hence [Lost in Translation Danger #5: We have no street cred.](#) You are ready to counsel, but no one is ready to listen. Because they don’t see the per-

sisting pattern of godliness in your own life. If you would seek to biblically counsel, you must have a life of integrity lived out before the world and your counselee. Paul says it to Titus like this, *“Show yourself in all respects to be a model of good works, and in your teaching show integrity, dignity, and sound speech that cannot be condemned, so that an opponent may be put to shame, having nothing evil to say about us.”*⁴ Your reputation and your integrity matters because God’s reputation and integrity matters.

How hard did Paul work at protecting his, and therefore Christ’s, reputation? Really hard. He worked *day and night* in order that no one could use his character to detract from the gospel. Here is another way to make this point: If your coworkers new Christ was like you, would they want to meet him? What about your children? Your unbelieving relatives. We cannot counsel that which we make no attempt to practice.

A Working Word Model for Engagement (2:13-16)

Lastly, in verses 13-16 we can see the tool Paul employed in engaging the unbelievers in Thessalonica. Let’s read it together [Read]. It reads pretty clearly, does it not? Very little exegesis is needed. Verse 13 is the crux of what Paul identifies as that which produced change in the unbelievers in Thessalonica. It was the Word. It still is the Word. The Word works. It takes unbelievers and makes them into those who imitate Christ-likeness, even in the midst of suffering. And this Word of God is nothing other than Christ himself,⁵ the fulfillment of all God’s words. Paul makes it clear in these verses that the Bible, the black ink on white pages is not some sort of magic potion that when applied creates mystical transformations. No, it is far more believable than that: *“...when [they] received the word of God, which you heard from [Paul & Co.], you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the Word of God.”* That, my friends, is simply another way of describing salvation. The received, by grace-empowered faith, the Word of God on its own terms. That’s it. That’s all. Then the Word worked in them.

This brings us to our last [Lost in Translation Danger #6: We offer counselees principles without power](#). You’ve learned all the principles. You can spot an idol at 100 yards. You can explain how beliefs and desires can mutate into lies and lusts. You can draw the 3-tree model with your eyes closed. You know exactly what the answer is when a sinner against brother who has not received a request for forgiveness from the offending party asks if he should forgive the offending party or not, and your able to identify the 3rd way in 99.9% of situations. You’ve mastered the principles and now you are tempted to co-opt worldly language and expunge the Word from the principles. Simply deliver Christless, Wordless, wisdom. This is akin to disembowelment. Are any of you hunters? Have you field dressed your game? Or maybe you’ve seen that last scene in Braveheart when Mel Gibson is being tortured by his captors... Disembowelment is grotesque. Disembowelment is what is happening when you remove the Word from your counseling. This too is grotesque. As counselors, we should, as a matter of habit, ground our coun-

⁴ Titus 2:7-8

⁵ see John 1

sel in the Word lest we offer gutless counsel, anemic advice, or impoverished help. It is never our cleverness or astuteness that changes a heart, it is the gospel-driven application of the Word alone which works in men and women to change them in a manner pleasing to God.

Conclusion

So, we must conclude. I'd like to, if you don't mind, return to my own story. Each one of these "Lost in Translation Dangers" are unbiblical tendencies I've observed in my own life as I interact with unbelievers in the secular world. As I read through this passage in 1 Thesalonians, I am deeply challenged. I know that the Lord has grown me in these areas – but I still have miles to go.

There was a time when I did not think the Bible had much to do at all with my profession and Greg Cook's pronouncements about the sufficiency of the Scripture for my field aroused an arrogant and dismissive response from me. There was a time when I really didn't know how to discuss with my patients the truth of the Bible and how it related to their lives in a manner that did not get me in trouble with my employer. There was a time when it was difficult for me to figure out how to teach my unbelieving students in a secular institution about schizophrenia and personality disorders in a way that pointed them to Christ. And there was a time when it was difficult to engage my colleagues in discussions about our personal lives and let them see how the Word/Christ is sufficient for all of life. I do not stand before you as one who is completely free from these difficulties, but I do stand before you as one who can with great confidence say that God has given grace for growth and change in all of these areas.

I share this with you because I want you to know that this same God that gave Paul reason to rejoice in his ability to radically transform lives; this same God that enabled Paul to deeply love and care for unbelievers while striving to live with flawless godliness and integrity; this same God that used his Word to utterly transform the lives of rebellious unbelievers into those that would suffer for their faith; is at work in you. Oh you have so much, have been given so much, can anticipate so much and be confident of so much! Counselors, go forward with the gospel, proclaiming to all who would listen the good news of Christ and his ability to both save and transform lives for his glory alone. This is the sole reason for your new found knowledge and skills. Let's Pray.