

# ***“The Bridges of God”***

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***“Men like to become Christians without crossing barriers.” (Donald McGavran)***

***Romans 16:1-27***

***July 22, 2018***

## ***A curious missionary***

As most of you know, Linda and I just returned from a 40<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary trip to Turks and Caicos, a gift from our church family for 25 years of service here. It's the southern end of the Bahamas chain, about 600 miles southeast of Miami. We stayed in a resort on Grace Bay on the north side of the island, but the most vivid shades of turquoise water lie on the south side in Chalk Sound and what's called Caicos Bank, which is a large and shallow underwater sand bar. In both cases, the water is almost clear, and the solid limestone or white sand reflects the sun with stunning beauty.

Although we stayed on the most populous island, in speaking with “belongers,” the local population, I was intrigued by how connected they feel to the other islands. There's only one manmade bridge that joins two of the populated islands, but belongers in Providenciales are only 75 miles from their capital city, Cockburn Town. To be sure, there is a lot of water separating them, but from the earliest human civilizations down to the modern era, they have used boats then planes then the Internet to create and sustain their interisland bridges.

I've titled today's sermon “The Bridges of God.” Like the last sermon I preached two weeks ago, it was inspired by a book. These two sermons present different ways of thinking about evangelism, our theme for this month. Two weeks ago we discussed the “Blue Ocean Strategy,” which is a visual for how vast God's world is. We shouldn't limit ourselves to battling the competition in the red ocean, but should look for people who are unnoticed and underserved, especially by Christians and our churches.

Today, however, I want to challenge you to think not so much about strangers in far off places, the kinds of places and people to whom we send missionaries or take

mission trips, as those to whom we already have connections. Bridges, we'll call them. The bridges God has placed within our reach.

This sermon was inspired by a book I read in seminary more than thirty years ago. The book was written by Donald McGavran, founding dean of the School of World Mission of Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California. Like my own father, he was born into a missionary family in India, then returned to serve as a missionary in India in the 1920s and 1930s.

McGavran was ordained and sent to India with the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), and his training focused on mission work primarily as relief to the poor, medical work, education, friendship, and evangelism. He observed that decades of mission work by his denomination had produced only thirty small churches, while other areas of mission work in India had resulted in explosive people movements – entire communities and groups coming to Christ. He became curious.

McGavran dedicated his life to studying, teaching, and writing the principles of church growth – when and how the church grows. While his initial study was with overseas missions, he and his disciples also applied the same principles to North American churches.

In his 1955 book, *The Bridges of God*, McGavran wrote the one sentence for which he became most famous, or, in the minds of some, infamous: “Men like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic, or class barriers.” His 1970 book, *Understanding Church Growth*, became the standard work in the field. It was that book I studied in seminary under Dr. Ken Mulholland, who had been one of Dr. McGavran's students at Fuller.

Chapter 20 of *Understanding Church Growth* is titled, “Stream Across the Bridges.” As McGavran unfolds this idea of “the bridges of God,” he says the biblical precedent for it is in Romans 16. Now you know why I chose this rather odd Scripture text full of names – one of those parts of the Bible we tend to skim if we read at all.

### ***All bridges lead to Rome***

You probably know something about Paul's letter to the Romans. It's considered by many his greatest work, the Magna Carta of the Christian faith. Romans was written to the church at Rome, the center of the empire, and, perhaps more importantly, Paul had never personally visited Rome. While his other letters were written mostly to follow up or clarify specific issues that arose after he established a church in a place like Philippi or Corinth, Paul assumes when he writes Romans that the readers may not know the essence of his message. Romans, then, is the most systematic explanation of Paul's worldview. Romans lays out the gospel – God's wrath on sinners of all kinds, God's provision for salvation through Jesus Christ, and the responsibility of believers to offer their bodies as living sacrifices to God in view of his mercies.

With such profound and deep concepts embedded in these chapters, it's no wonder that we get to chapter 16 and ignore it. It doesn't seem essential to the message.

And maybe it isn't. But McGavran reminds us it's still instructive. First, Paul mentions by name 26 individuals in a city he had never visited. "Some of these were his own relatives," McGavran says. Further, "While Paul considered himself a special messenger of Christ to the Gentiles, he streamed out to them across his bridges in the Jewish community and their bridges to others."

Let's take a look at Romans 16 to see what McGavran's talking about. What we notice first is the diversity of those he addresses. Of the 26 names, about one third are women, and many are women who lead. Romans 16 is one key text for making the biblical case that women can and should have positions of responsibility and authority in the church. Not everyone winds up with the same conclusion, I'm sure you know, but it's clear Paul is unapologetic in naming Phoebe as a deacon (1), Priscilla not only beside but in front of her husband Aquila among Paul's co-workers (3), Mary, a hard worker (6), Junia, an apostle (7), Tryphena and Tryphosa, probably twins, who are "the Lord's workers," and others.

There's not only diversity in gender among these people, but in race. Aquila and Priscilla (3) are Jews, and Paul also mentions his "fellow Jews" in verses 7 and 11. But most of the names in this chapter are Greek or Roman.

Finally, there is diversity of class. Aristobulus (10) and Narcissus (11) are heads of households, most likely with important government connections. Ampliatus (8), Urbanus (9), Hermes (14), Philologus and Julia (15) were common slave names.

What's remarkable is that all these folks were together in one church. We don't know for sure that this meant they worshiped or studied or served together. Rome was a cosmopolitan metropolis and it would have been difficult for all of them to meet together regularly. Still, Paul treats them all as one church. They display the marvelous mosaic that ideally is the body of Christ.

But this is not McGavran's primary point. He simply wants to note the connections among them. How did they all become Christians in the first place? Someone streamed across the bridges God had created – natural lines of connection to Paul or someone else connected to Paul. Notice how Paul describes these individuals – "our sister" (1), "my co-workers" (3), "my fellow Jews" (7), "my dear friend" (8), "the household of" (10, 11), "women who work hard" (12), "his mother, who has been a mother to me, too" (13), "his sister" (15), and so on. The connections are not only personal, they are relational. This is what we mean by "the bridges of God."

After Paul warns the Romans of the constant threat of disunity, provoked by Satan, who God will soon crush (17-20), he continues with another list of names in

verses 21-24. These are those who are with him when he writes the letter – his co-worker Timothy (who was the product of a Jewish mother and Gentile father) and his Jewish coworkers (21), his secretary Tertius (22), his host (23), and even a city official named Erastus (24).

What unites all these people, Paul says, is “my gospel, the message I proclaim about Jesus Christ.” Paul longs that “all the Gentiles might come to the obedience that comes from faith” (26). This is his heart, the heart for the world to know Christ.

Paul really does believe that the message he preaches – the whole world is under the judgment of God’s wrath, but by faith in Jesus Christ we can be freed to a new life of hope and joy and peace, knowing that nothing can separate us from the love of God – Paul really does believe he has been compelled by God’s love to spread this gospel (Romans 1:14-17).

Do you?

If you don’t, then what I’m about to say doesn’t really matter anyway. If church is just a hobby or a side interest, then this month’s sermon theme of “Spread” really isn’t all that important. But if you believe, with me, that the ultimate meaning of life is found in God, that Jesus is his eternal Son, that he is the living water and the bread of life and that this good news is the most important and best news, then let’s engage the question of how we spread this gospel by streaming across the bridges.

### ***Spread across bridges***

When Donald McGavran wrote, “Men like to become Christians without crossing ethnic, linguistic, or class barriers,” he meant that the most common way people respond to the Gospel is when they hear it from someone very much like them. College students are best at reaching other college students. Turks & Caicos belongers connect with other TCI belongers much better than Russian athletes could. Prostitutes who have been reclaimed by Christ will have better success with other prostitutes. Wealthy, yacht-owning, private-jet flying magnates know how to speak the language of their kind.

McGavran was criticized for suggesting that churches should be homogeneous, or made up of all the same kind of people. He wasn’t saying that at all. The call to follow Jesus Christ is a call to be inclusive and to break down barriers. But people are most likely to receive the gospel if they hear it from someone who already has something in common with them – who already has a bridge. God is calling Christians to stream across the bridges God has placed in front of them. Go to your relatives, your neighbors, your fellow students, your co-workers, people you know. The church should equip and empower believers to use those bridges.

McGavran also noted that sometimes God calls us to form bridges where there are none yet. This is what missionaries do when they go to other countries. They learn

the language, build trust through education and medicine, make friendships, understand the culture. This is what campus ministers and student pastors do. This is what God calls all of us to do, really – to stream across the existing bridges but to make new ones. The Apostle Paul used the bridges he had – especially the connections with other Jews – but where would the church be, indeed, where would you and I be, if he hadn't found a way to create new bridges to the Gentile world? It's a both-and.

So the question today is first a "Who" question. Take a look at your bulletin insert. It suggests a proactive response to the idea of "Spread." Some of these ideas are "blue ocean" ideas, but #1 is a "bridge" idea: "Identify one person or family in whom you will devote time in prayer and in person toward a spiritual conversation." More than likely, this is someone you already know. It's one thing to share Christ or have a spiritual conversation with a stranger, someone you'll likely never see or hear from again. I had some of those conversations this past week while waiting to get my rental car washed in Providenciales. God may well use you to plant a seed with a stranger.

What I'd like you to consider is an effort at a spiritual conversation with someone you already know. But don't turn me off yet. This is not what you might think of as stereotypical evangelism – lying in wait like a predator feline waiting to pounce on someone at just the right moment and corner them into an uncomfortable conversation. Most of us cringe when the doorbell rings and we look out and see two or three people who may be sincere but we know are armed with pamphlets and questions that will make us squirm. None of us wants to be that person.

Think of someone to whom you already have a bridge – some point of connection. What I'm asking is that you devote time in prayer – that in itself is releasing outcomes and trusting God – and in person – meaning that you choose to be around this person or couple or group or family. You're going to say to God, "I'm willing to have a spiritual conversation or not. I'm going to trust you to guide me in the moment. I'm not going to force it. I'll look for opportunities to be with this person so that I'm available for a spiritual conversation."

### ***How to have a spiritual conversation***

As you might expect, I have spiritual conversations all the time. I've had spiritual conversations with most of you. The main reason people come to me is to have a spiritual conversation. I realize that's not the case with most of you who are not pastors. However, I've learned some things through the years about having spiritual conversations just because I've practiced it. I also engaged Chris Van Allsburg twice in the last couple of weeks about his thoughts on spiritual conversations. What I'm going to share with you is a collection of his thoughts and mine.

*First, show interest.* The person with whom you are having this conversation may be a relative you've known since childhood or a person you just met at a car wash,

as I did in Providenciales. Three different people sat down at the same picnic table in the waiting area with me, and I ended up in a spiritual conversation with all three.

The main reason was that I started asking them about them. I was curious. What do they do for a living? What do they think of tourists on the island? Have they lived in Turks and Caicos all their lives? Do they have family here? The interest must be genuine. I need to rejoice in their joy, empathize with their hurts, connect with their world.

*Second, be vulnerable.* Risk sharing your own story. Because all three persons I talked to at the car wash this week were in the tourist industry – real estate or taxi service – they were all interested in me, and asked what brought me to the island. I told them my wife and I were celebrating our 40<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary, and it was a gift from our church where we’ve served for 25 years. That usually turned the conversation in a spiritual direction.

“Aha!” you say. “You have an advantage. I’m not a pastor, so what I do doesn’t flip a switch to a spiritual conversation.” That may be true, but you still have a story. When I say, “be vulnerable,” and “share your story,” I don’t mean that it necessarily has to be a spiritual story, especially not at first. Maybe you’re having a bad day or a bad life, at least the way the world understands it. When someone asks, “How are you?” you can say, “Not so good today, but I still have hope.” Or maybe the answer is, “Better than I deserve,” which can be a segue to a spiritual conversation. Or maybe the jewelry you’re wearing or the book you’re reading can be a starting point. It doesn’t even have to be a Christian book. “I’m reading a book about someone who just can’t seem to straighten her life out. Do you ever feel that way?” All of us can use our current story or situation as a bridge.

*Finally, ask questions.* I’m going to attach to my sermon manuscript some of the questions Chris suggested as good transitions to a spiritual conversation. Jesus used questions with great effect to get to the heart of a person. He even answered questions with questions. If you just tuck even a few questions in your mental tool bag you can be ready for that spiritual conversation, questions like these: What does it mean to be a good person? What do you think happens when people die? What do you think about churches in this area?

The caution is this: Don’t ask questions just as a setup for a “gotcha” conversation. Ask questions because you’re genuinely interested in how that person thinks and where their struggles lie? If they’ve been wounded by the church, you don’t have to defend the church or say how great your church is. You can ask for more of their story. If they feel very distant from God, you want to dig deeper, not immediately launch into a Bible verse or your own story.

Ask leading questions that keep the conversation going and hopefully lead to yet another conversation. If you’re concerned about someone asking you a question you

can't answer, relax. 1 Peter 3:15 doesn't say to have an answer to every objection someone has. It says to have an answer for the hope that is in you. Be ready to share what this gospel of Jesus means to you.

Above all, remember as Todd Byrd pointed out last week, there's our part and God's part. We don't convert people. I'm not responsible for someone else's spiritual life or destiny. I simply want to be available to walk across the bridge God has placed in front of me, or ask him for help in creating a bridge that wasn't there before. Amen.

#### Questions from Chris van Allsburg

- 1) Do you have any religious or spiritual background at all?
- 2) I'm interested in people's philosophy of life. Is it ok to ask you about yours?
- 3) It seems to me that there are three main positions that people hold in our culture: some people believe in God, others don't, or think we can't know. Still others believe there is a spiritual force in the universe kind of like the force in Star Wars. Where do you fall in that spectrum?
- 4) I'm interested in people's ideas about the Big Questions of Life. What is one question about life you would like answered?
- 5) What do you think it takes for someone to be happy or have a meaningful life?
- 6) Who do you think is the most remarkable person to have ever lived? Why?
- 7) What do you think of Jesus of Nazareth? To you, who is he?
- 8) Why do you think Jesus has had so much influence on people throughout history?
- 9) If you were able to be shown reasons why Christianity is true, would be interested in checking them out?
- 10) If you were convinced that God was real, would that change your life at all?
- 11) How familiar are you with the Gospels in the New Testament?
- 12) What do you think people should do with their guilt?
- 13) What does it mean to be a good person?
- 14) Why should people be good? Where does this desire to be good come from?
- 15) Why is there so much suffering and pain in life?
- 16) Why do some people seem just plain "evil"?
- 17) If what you believed about God was \*not\* true, would you want to know the truth?
- 18) Do you like the outdoors? What is it about waterfalls and mountains or the beach that we love so much?
- 19) When you are in a quiet place all by yourself, what do you think about?
- 20) Do you ever worry about things? What do you worry about?
- 21) If you could do anything with your life, what would it be? Why?
- 22) What do you think happens at death?
- 23) If there is a heaven or a good place where people go when they die, how do they get there?
- 24) If God were to ask you why he should let you into heaven, what would you say?
- 25) If what you believed was actually wrong, would you want to know?