

A Gospel Tipping Point?

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The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference by Malcolm Gladwell (Little Brown, 2000) outlines an interesting concept with applications to the church, and specifically to evangelism.

According to Gladwell, tipping points are "levels at which the momentum for change becomes unstoppable." He outlines some of the sociological changes that mark everyday life, claiming that "ideas and products and messages and behaviors spread like viruses do." He describes "three rules of epidemics" (the tipping points of epidemics).

(1) *The Law of the Few* suggests that epidemic change depends on the involvement of people with certain skills. He describes three kinds of people who contribute to the momentum necessary for change or accepting new concepts or messages.

Connectors are the people who "link us up with the world." These people are themselves connected and thrive on relationships.

Mavens are the "information specialists" we rely upon to connect us with new information." They accumulate knowledge and know how to share it with others.

Salesmen are "persuaders", people with powerful negotiation skills. They have an ability that goes beyond what they say, that makes others want to agree with them.

(2) *The Stickiness Factor* refers to the specific content of a message that makes it memorable and gives it impact. Gladwell cites "Sesame Street" as an example of how one may enhance stickiness and systematically engineering stickiness into a message.

(3) *The Power of Context* says that human behavior is sensitive to and strongly influenced by its environment. Gladwell says it this way: "Epidemics are sensitive to the conditions and circumstances of the times and places in which they occur."

Consider these applications. First, the spread of the gospel depends on different kinds of people. Some people are relational and know lots of other people, some people can process and share information, some people are convincing persuaders. I am reminded of the three "Ps" of evangelism: presence, proclamation, and persuasion. All are necessary to the process—the church must function as a body if the evangelistic task is to be accomplished.

Second, the message (including the gospel message) must have "sticking points" (applications?). This is why all preaching is not created equal. One must answer: Why does it matter? How does it make a difference? What is its value? A gospel presentation, individual or public, that is accepted has a point or points of "stickiness".

Third, the social context matters. Why did revivalism prosper on the frontier? What were the contributing factors in the First Great Awakening, or the Second Great Awakening? What kinds of social and cultural connections should contemporary Christians seek in order to develop a

context in which the gospel can prosper? The answers to these questions can assist the church in understanding how the gospel can best be communicated in our world.