

# WHERE DO WE BEGIN?

We have now discussed the biblical basis for evangelism, the need for sharing the gospel, and the content of the gospel. However, that doesn't tell us much about *how* to share the gospel. As we start to think about how we are going to share the gospel with others, it might be helpful to think of how the gospel message has come to us and anyone else. This message is mediated from God to his people to those who are not yet his people. All Christians heard the gospel for the first time at some point, most likely over many conversations, or through many sermons, or perhaps from reading a Christian book or the Bible. God did not tell us the gospel directly. Instead, he works through his people. That is why, as we have already seen, Peter can call Christians a "holy priesthood" and a "royal priesthood" (1 Pet. 2:5, 9). We mediate God's message to the unbelieving world. Therefore, we need to consider our role as God's messengers.

We have already given considerable attention to God and his gospel, and we will spend time thinking about how to talk to others about Jesus. For now, let's consider our role as the ones who stand in between God and unbelievers.

## BETWEEN TWO WORLDS<sup>1</sup>

As Christians, we have a unique position in this world. We belong to God and our true King is Jesus, but we find ourselves here with a mission to perform for our King. Christians often make one of two errors. Either they assimilate to the world, trying desperately to fit in with our culture and disobeying Jesus in the process; or they separate themselves from the world, failing to engage it for Christ. These two opposite errors are not what Jesus wants us to do.

On the night that Jesus was arrested, he prayed a rich and beautiful prayer to the Father. Knowing that his death, resurrection, and ascension would soon take place, he prayed for his followers. He prayed,

<sup>15</sup> I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. <sup>16</sup> They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. <sup>17</sup> Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. <sup>18</sup> As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. (John 17:15-18)

Jesus did not ask his Father to remove the disciples from the world or place them in a Christian bubble. He asked the Father to keep them from Satan and to make them holy through his word. Just as the Father sent Jesus, Jesus sent his disciples. Jesus engaged with "sinners," people whom the religious leaders considered unclean. He expected his disciples to do the same thing. He wanted them to be in the world, but not of the world.

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<sup>1</sup> This heading comes from the title of John Stott's excellent book on preaching: *Between Two Worlds* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982). In one chapter, "Preaching as Bridge-building," he focuses on the need for the preacher to build bridges between God and his revealed word in the Bible and the preacher's human audience. The same could be said for the evangelist who tries to connect unbelievers to God.

According to Jerram Barrs, “The Christian’s calling is never to retreat from the world of unbelievers into an enclave where there are only fellow Christians, nor is it a calling to personal separation, where the only people one knows are fellow believers, for as we see in the Gospels, Jesus lived among those who did not know him.”<sup>2</sup> However, to be in the world is not to lose our distinctive beliefs and way of living. “While Christians are to be in the world, they are to live not in conformity to the standards of the world, but rather in obedience to the Father’s word, just as Jesus did.”<sup>3</sup> Maintaining this balance between being in the world and not being of the world is not easy, so devout Christians often give up on the world. “Because it is so difficult to live faithfully in the world, we are tempted to retreat from the world of sin and unbelief, and to develop a negative and superior attitude toward our neighbors in the world.”<sup>4</sup> Yet when we retreat, we fail to perform the mission that Jesus gave us.

We find ourselves between two worlds, the world of God and this present world. A great chasm separates the two. Jesus, the God-man, perfectly filled that gap. Before his ascension, he commanded the disciples and all Christians to be his representatives, to stand in the gap and reconcile others to God.

This discussion raises a question. How do we successfully negotiate following Christ, on one hand, and bringing the gospel to the world, on the other?

### **AMBASSADORS FOR GOD**

The apostle Paul uses an interesting word to describe his role as God’s representative. He refers to himself and his associates as ambassadors. Since Christians are supposed to imitate Paul, who was imitating Christ (1 Cor. 11:1), we can surmise that we, too, are ambassadors of Christ. This is what Paul wrote to the church in Corinth.

<sup>11</sup> Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade others. But what we are is known to God, and I hope it is known also to your conscience. <sup>12</sup> We are not commending ourselves to you again but giving you cause to boast about us, so that you may be able to answer those who boast about outward appearance and not about what is in the heart. <sup>13</sup> For if we are beside ourselves, it is for God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you. <sup>14</sup> For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; <sup>15</sup> and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised.

<sup>16</sup> From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him thus no longer. <sup>17</sup> Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. <sup>18</sup> All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; <sup>19</sup> that

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<sup>2</sup> Jerram Barrs, *Learning Evangelism from Jesus* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009), 12.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 13.

is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.

<sup>20</sup> Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us.

We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. <sup>21</sup> For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (2 Cor. 5:11-21)

In the context of 2 Corinthians, Paul often uses the pronoun *we* to refer to himself and his associates. He uses *you* to refer to the Corinthians. This fact might tempt us to think that only people like Paul, perhaps only pastors and professional evangelists, are ambassadors for Christ. But there are many reasons to think that all Christians are ambassadors. As noted above, Peter indicates that all Christians are, in some way, priests, and Paul tells us that all Christians have a role in ministry (Eph. 4:11-12). Paul also tells the Christians at Philippi that they have an ambassadorial role. Therefore, it is reasonable to believe that all Christians are Jesus' diplomatic representatives on earth.

Paul Barnett comes to the same conclusion. Commenting on this passage from 2 Corinthians, he writes, "If, as is certain, the *us* whom God reconciled to himself represents a group larger than the apostles, then the corresponding *us* to whom God gave *the ministry of reconciliation* (verse 18) must also exceed the limited number of the apostolic circle. It is, therefore, reasonable to suppose that all believers are to be caught up in the ministry of reconciliation."<sup>5</sup> Barnett observes something very interesting in this passage. The Greek word *hyper*, translated as "for," appears six times. Christ died *for* all Christians and it is *for* our sake that he died on the cross. He represented us sinners on the cross. In his physical absence, in the time between his two advents, we represent him on earth. We are ambassadors *for* Christ.<sup>6</sup> God makes his appeal to unbelievers through us as we share the gospel. We are the instruments he uses to reach the world.

What does it mean to be an ambassador? According to one dictionary, an ambassador is "a diplomatic agent of the highest rank accredited to a foreign government or sovereign as the resident representative of his or her own government or sovereign or appointed for a special and often temporary diplomatic assignment."<sup>7</sup> The ambassador is the authorized representative of a sovereign nation or state, sent to another nation or state. For example, the American ambassador to China is a US citizen, authorized by the US government to represent America to the Chinese government. He is sent from his homeland to China, where he lives temporarily, and he is authorized to represent the US to the Chinese government. This will require that he knows all things American (law, foreign policy, political interests, customs) quite well. He will also have to understand the Chinese government, its policies and laws, and Chinese culture. His goal is to influence China for America. Of course, though he will be diplomatic and friendly toward the

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<sup>5</sup> Paul Barnett, *The Message of 2 Corinthians*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 121 (italics in original).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, 11<sup>th</sup> ed. (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, 2003).

Chinese, he will always side with America whenever there is conflict, because he has sworn allegiance to his home country.

Paul certainly saw himself as such an ambassador. He saw himself as one sent by the King, Jesus, to bring people into the kingdom. According to David Garland, “He is Christ’s spokesman. He does not act on his own authority but under the commission of a greater power and authority who sent him. Paul therefore understands himself to be divinely authorized to announce to the world God’s terms for peace.”<sup>8</sup> Though Paul’s loyalty was to the kingdom of God, he tried to understand the culture and adapt to it without compromising any of his beliefs and without compromising his obedience to Christ. In his first letter to the Corinthians, he writes,

<sup>19</sup> For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. <sup>20</sup> To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. <sup>21</sup> To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. <sup>22</sup> To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. <sup>23</sup> I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings. (1 Cor. 9:19-23)

Of course, this does not mean that Paul became a drunkard to reach drunks, or an adulterer to reach adulterers. Rather, while being “under the law of Christ,” Paul did whatever he could to share the gospel with others.

Paul thought of other Christians as ambassadors, too. When he wrote to the Philippians, he knew that he was writing to people who lived in a Roman colony, where many of the people had Roman citizenship. Yet he told them, “Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ” (Phil. 1:27). That phrase can be translated, “Only behave as citizens worthy of the gospel of Christ.” The meaning of that phrase is clarified later in his letter when he tells the Philippians, “But our citizenship is in heaven” (Phil. 3:20). Though they were Roman citizens, like Paul, the Philippian Christians were, first and foremost, citizens of heaven, of the kingdom of God. They were never to forget their ultimate allegiance. And while they were away from their homeland, they were supposed to represent their King to the world. Paul told the Philippians,

“<sup>14</sup> Do all things without grumbling or disputing, <sup>15</sup> that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, <sup>16</sup> holding fast to the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I may be proud that I did not run in vain” (Phil. 2:14-16).

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<sup>8</sup> David E. Garland, *2 Corinthians*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999), 295.

The Philippians were supposed to shine like lights in a corrupt world, while holding fast to the word of life. That phrase—“holding fast to the word of life”—can be translated “holding forth the word of life.” If that is the correct translation, the emphasis is on evangelism. Either way, it is possible that Paul is echoing the words of Jesus:

“<sup>14</sup> You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. <sup>15</sup> Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. <sup>16</sup> In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.” (Matt. 5:14-16)

We are supposed to reflect the light of this world, Jesus, by our words and our good works. If we are not active in the world, will anyone see our light? If we are not following Jesus, how can we light in an otherwise dark world?

### **PREREQUISITES FOR BEING AN AMBASSADOR FOR CHRIST**

If we are going to be effective and obedient ambassadors for Christ, we will have to do a few things.

#### **1. Submit to the Lord Jesus Christ**

To become a Christian is to recognize that Jesus is the true Lord of the universe. He is our Ruler, our King. Our ultimate allegiance is to him. Though it is possible for God to use anyone to share the gospel—just as he used Balaam to bless Israel—it is more likely that he will use someone who loves, trusts, and obeys Jesus. If we are truly living our lives for Jesus, it will become more natural for us to speak about him and point others to him. If we are regularly in prayer, reading our Bibles, serving our local church, and obeying Jesus, sharing the gospel won’t feel so foreign to us.

Mack Stiles, who worked for InterVarsity Christian Fellowship for many years as a campus minister and evangelist, realized that the best way to be an evangelist is to have a healthy relationship with Jesus. “The most effective action in evangelism is having a deep and vibrant faith. So we start with lordship—not a gospel outline or an evangelistic method, but Christ. *Our first step of evangelism is to yield to Christ’s lordship.*”<sup>9</sup> Stiles believes that this lordship can be reflected in four ways: practicing spiritual disciplines such as Bible reading and prayer; being an active member of a church; sharing the gospel; and daring to take a risk.<sup>10</sup>

We should remember that just as an American ambassador has pledged his allegiance to the US, so we must never forget that our primary allegiance is to Jesus. This will keep us from assimilating into the sinful culture around us even as we engage the world. We must also realize that we cannot change the message of our homeland’s government. We have the gospel of the kingdom of Jesus Christ and we must never alter or tamper with this message.

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<sup>9</sup> J. Mack Stiles, *Speaking of Jesus* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 28 (italics in original).

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

## 2. Commit to the task of evangelism

If we are going to be effective ambassadors, we must embrace this role. Taking part in this training is a good step, but it is just a start. We must take additional steps.

Mark Dever suggests the following twelve steps.<sup>11</sup>

**1. Pray.** We must remember that “Salvation and glory and power belong to our God” (Rev. 19:1). Pray for opportunities to share the gospel and start praying for your unbelieving family members, friends, neighbors, and coworkers. Pray that you would meet some more unbelievers with whom you could share the gospel.

**2. Plan.** If you know unbelievers, plan on spending some time with them. We have to be intentional about sharing our faith. “We plan for so many less important things; why not plan for our evangelism?”<sup>12</sup>

**3. Accept** that evangelism is your job. Don’t wait for your pastor or another “super-Christian” to share the gospel with people around you.

**4. Understand** that every Christian has a role to play in evangelism. “Not having the gift of mercy in no way excuses us from being merciful. All Christians are to exercise mercy; some will be particularly gifted to do this in special ways at certain times, but all are to be merciful. So with evangelism.”<sup>13</sup>

**5. Be faithful.** We must be more faithful to God than to our employers, our friends, and our family. We must obey God first.

**6. Risk.** Sharing the gospel will require risk. We may risk looking like fools, or losing friends. We may be ridiculed or misunderstood.

**7. Prepare.** Get equipped to share the gospel. If you’re reading all of this material, you are becoming more prepared.

**8. Look** for opportunities to share the gospel. There may be unbelievers in your life right now who, for some reason, you’ve overlooked. They need to hear the gospel and you may be the only Christian they know.

**9. Love.** Love God and love others so much that you share the gospel. “We share the gospel because we love people. And we don’t share the gospel because we don’t love people.”<sup>14</sup>

**10. Fear.** Fear God, not man. “When we don’t share the gospel, we are essentially refusing to live in the fear of the Lord.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Mark Dever, *The Gospel and Personal Evangelism* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007), 24-29.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

**11. Stop** making excuses. When it comes to evangelism, there are a lot of excuses we can make, but none of them hold up in the light of God's word.

**12. Consider** all that God is and all he has done for us. Consider God's glory and love. You may need to reconsider your salvation. I don't mean that you need to question whether you are saved. Rather, you might need to remember that you are saved only by God's grace, and that God sent someone to share the gospel with you. Our gratitude for salvation may rekindle our love for God, which will motivate us to share the good news of Jesus Christ with others.

We should also commit ourselves to truth. If we do not believe that Jesus is the only way to be saved from eternal condemnation, if we do not believe that people need to hear and respond to the gospel in order to be saved, and if we do not believe that the Bible is actually true, we won't feel any urgency with regard to the gospel. If the gospel is just one more story among many, we won't believe that people actually need it. But if we believe that the gospel is The Story, the one about the only true God, our sin, and the only way to be reconciled to him, then we will want to share this story with others.

Mack Stiles believes that all evangelists need to be motivated, equipped, and available.<sup>16</sup> We are motivated by our love for God and for others and the fact that people need to believe the gospel in order to be made right with God.

We become equipped when we study the gospel, the Bible, and theology. We become equipped when we study apologetics (which we will do later). And we become equipped when we study the culture in which we live. "Being equipped means understanding the secular mindset. Study trends. Think what the Bible has to say about events in our world. Our ignorance of the secular world around us weakens our credibility to non-Christians."<sup>17</sup> Know the world around you and think deeply about how the message of the Bible speaks to the issues of today. Think about *why* things happen in our world. How does the Bible speak to the root cause of evil and suffering? We can trace all of our problems and our needs back to sin and our separation from God.

Randy Newman, another campus evangelist, believes that equipped evangelists need to be able to do three things: declare the gospel, defend the gospel, and dialogue the gospel.<sup>18</sup> The last skill involves being able to enter into an actual give-and-take conversation about Christianity. This requires not only proclaiming the gospel and answering questions; it also requires asking our own questions of non-Christians, to help them think more deeply about their own assumptions and beliefs. We will discuss this later.

Finally, we need to make ourselves available to non-Christians. We need to enter into the world and venture outside our Christian bubbles. We need to meet people who don't know Jesus. And we need to love these people, even when it is difficult.

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<sup>16</sup> Stiles, *Speaking of Jesus*, 44ff.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>18</sup> Randy Newman, *Questioning Evangelism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2004), 14-15.

### 3. Commit to people

The previous point brings us to our final prerequisite for being an ambassador for Christ. We will need to commit to people. It is one thing to commit to a body of knowledge or a task. It is quite another to commit to actual people. People are messy and complicated. Relationships require time, patience, and grace. The process of sharing the gospel requires more of us when we commit to individual people.

There are many ways of sharing the gospel. Some people simply invite others to church, so the pastor can evangelize for them. Some churches organize programs in which they knock on the doors of houses in their neighborhood, hoping to share the gospel with strangers. Others preach outside large events, such as the Super Bowl. Some people simply show up at public places like Pike Place Market or the local mall and hand out tracts or do street preaching.

I don't think that any of these ways of evangelizing are wrong, but I'm not sure that they are effective. I think you need to have the gift of evangelism in order to be a street preacher or engage a stranger in a gospel conversation. Most of us don't have that gift and would not feel comfortable evangelizing in such a manner. I tend to agree with Stiles when he writes, "talking to strangers about faith is a lousy way to see people become Christians."<sup>19</sup> Tim Chester and Steve Timmis believe that "People want a form of evangelism they can stick in their schedule, switch off, and leave behind when they go home."<sup>20</sup> However, personal evangelism—also called friendship evangelism—requires more time, energy, and love. It requires committing to a person, not just a message. In short, it requires treating people as people, and not just targets.

Becoming friends with unbelievers with the intent of sharing the gospel can be a very effective way of evangelizing. Part of the reason why I believe that this is better is because the gospel is a more complex message than most of us assume. Telling someone the gospel may involve several long conversations. Most people come to understand the gospel by repeated exposure to it. In addition, when we befriend unbelievers, they will have an opportunity to see Christians who not only tell them the gospel, but also live it out in their daily lives.

Personal evangelism requires sharing both the gospel and our lives. Notice how Paul includes the sharing of both the gospel and himself with the Thessalonians: "So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us" (1 Thess. 2:8). Most unbelievers have not had a friendship with a true Christian, someone who seeks to follow Jesus beyond Sunday mornings. They need to hear the gospel message, but they also need to see that others believe it and obey it.

Committing to people will involve time, but it also involves getting to know the other person. Before we unload a full presentation of the gospel, we would do well to try to understand our new friend. You should start with the basics. Find out about this person's background. Where were they born? Where did they go to school? What is their family situation? What do they do for work? What are their hobbies? You will most likely learn these

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<sup>19</sup> Stiles, *Speaking of Jesus*, 43.

<sup>20</sup> Tim Chester and Steve Timmis, *Total Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 57.

things just by spending time with this person and by listening. I have found that most people simply want someone who will listen attentively.

When you know the basic biographical details of a person's life, move on to deeper things. Try to find out how this person views the world. What does he or she care for most? What do they hope for and what do they dream about? What do they fear? Are they struggling with a particular issue, like poor health or bad finances or broken relationships? What is/are their idol/idols? (We all have them and if you're a sharp observer, you will be able to recognize someone else's idols long before they do. You may also be able to help this person understand that their idol will never satisfy their soul, because only Jesus can do that.)

You will also want to let your new friend know more about you. Open up with them and be honest about yourself. Try to find some common ground. See if you can find a common hobby or at least some activity that you could do together. Here's a useful equation: gospel intention + befriending a non-Christian + time spent together = a greater chance of sharing the gospel with someone in a meaningful way.

Once you've gotten to know someone rather well, you might want to ask that person some of the big questions in life. We'll spend more time on asking questions later, but for now, consider these questions:

What is the purpose of life? (Or similar questions: What do you believe is the purpose of life? What is the point of life?)

What is your greatest problem?

What is your greatest joy?

What are you looking forward to?

What brings you hope?

If you won the lottery and never had to work again, what would you do?

Why, do you think, is there pain and suffering in the world?

Some of those questions are easier to ask than others, but don't be afraid of asking "big questions." People will respond to them. It's only when you mention God or Jesus that people start to squirm. I was recently in a restaurant at the airport in San Francisco, waiting for my flight. Having ordered, I was sitting there reading part of James Sire's *The Universe Next Door*<sup>21</sup>, a book comparing the Christian worldview with others worldviews. Two young men, who just arrived in town to see the 49ers' playoff game, sat near me. They were friendly, excited to be in the city (they were from Wyoming, I believe) and to see the big game. One of them saw me with the book opened and asked me what I was reading. I told him it was about worldviews: how people view reality and the purpose of life. He said something like, "That's deep stuff." I agreed. I didn't stay much longer, but if I had more time, I could have said, "It is. So, what do you think the purpose of life is?"

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<sup>21</sup> James W. Sire, *The Universe Next Door*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009).

Asking these types of questions is helpful, because we know that we have the answers. As John Stott writes, “We are also convinced that Jesus Christ either has the answers to these questions or—in the case of intractable mysteries like pain and evil—that he throws more light on them than can be gathered from any other source. Jesus Christ, we believe, is the fulfillment of every truly human aspiration. To find him is to find ourselves.”<sup>22</sup>

### QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

Are you “in the world and not of it”? How could you engage the world more fully? How can you make sure that you do not become “of the world”?

Are you submitting to the lordship of Jesus in all areas of your life?

Of the twelve steps to becoming an evangelist listed on pages 57-58, which ones do you need to take now?

Do you have the proper motivation for evangelism?

Do you feel equipped to share the gospel? What else do you need to learn?

Have you made yourself available to meet non-Christians?

Are you praying for opportunities to share the gospel?

Are you praying for new non-Christian friends?

How can you meet more non-Christians? Have you met your neighbors and coworkers?

Are their people that you come into contact with on a regular basis that you befriend?

(Think about anyone you see on a somewhat regular basis. Are there shops or restaurants that you frequent? Do you see someone in the gym or the park or somewhere else that you haven’t met yet?)

Are you willing to share both your life and the gospel with others? If not, what has to change before you can do that?

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<sup>22</sup> Stott, *Between Two Worlds*, 151.