

Ad-Mission Kickoff
Evangelism of Postmoderns
Acts 17:16-34

Introduction:

Let's begin with a quick game of word association. I will say a word and give you three seconds to respond. Capture the first word that enters your mind in three seconds and tell us what you think. Are you ready? The word is "evangelism."

Ron Bennett, director of discipleship ministries at Navigators, wrote an excellent chapter called "Authentic Church Based Evangelism in a Relational Age." His chapter is in a book edited by D.A. Carson called *Telling the Truth: Evangelizing Postmoderns*. Listen to the way Mr. Bennett starts his introduction:

Evangelism! Nothing can strike terror, guilt, or just plain perspiration to the average Christian quicker than the topic of evangelism. Ask people what they associate with the word evangelism or evangelist and you get answers such as "pushy," "used-car salesman," "televangelist," "door-to-door salesperson," "Crusades," and so forth.

I have observed that there are three effective ways to get your heart rate up to the healthy aerobic level. One is to jog for thirty minutes. Another is to lose sight of your two-year old toddler while shopping in a blown-glass retail store. The third is to raise the subject of evangelism. On hearing the word, most people look for exit signs, feign headaches, or remember appointments that were never made.

Why are we so terrified with the topic?

If we are honest with ourselves in the answering of that question, I think we would say such things as...

- I am afraid of rejection.
- I am not prepared for their questions.
- I do not feel I have the right to be so invasive.
- I am afraid of failure.
- I don't know where to start.

Why do we get so guilt-ridden over the topic?

Again, if we are honest with ourselves in the answering of this question, I think we would say such things as...

- I know I ought to but I can't.
- I am tired of being pressured into evangelism.
- I don't feel as though I am qualified to tell others.
- I have blown my testimony in the past. They won't respect me.

Yet at the same time, I do not believe for a moment that we do not evangelize because we do not want to. I listen to Christians pray and share requests. We all pray for our lost f.r.a.n. (an acrostic for

friends, relatives, associates and neighbors). We want them evangelized, we just don't think we are the best suited to tell them. Is that accurate?

Why don't we feel suited? Is it due to lack of training in evangelism? I don't think so. To reduce evangelism to a training class is to reduce the Gospel to a one-size-fits-all sales pitch. It's far more than that. Is it due to a lack of zeal for the lost? I don't think so for a moment. Is it due to a deficient walk with Christ? Probably not! We do not have to walking perfectly in order to be used by God in evangelism. So what is it? What is it that keeps us from evangelizing?

I suggest these few realities:

1. I think we have no proper understanding as to what evangelism means.
2. I think we have an improper understanding as to the role of the evangelist.
3. I think we have been sold a bill of goods when it comes to measuring success in evangelism.

You add all of those realities to the fact that our culture is quickly past Christian traditions and cultural mores and you have a church that has no idea where to even begin with the conversation. 25 years ago every American believed that sex belonged in marriage. They may have rebelled against it, but they all knew that was the best. Not so today. If you belong to that thin sliver of society that holds such a view, you are simply an archaic prude. Our culture has no categories for talk of God, sin, and holiness. How do you introduce Christ into that mindset? There are three principles we must remember when evangelizing our non-churched culture (Postmoderns):

Evangelizing Postmodern individuals¹

1. Postmodern individuals hold some fundamental positions they are going to have to abandon in order to become Christians. In other words, there are massive amounts of opinions and thought-patterns that have to be unlearned. You can't evangelize postmoderns with an event. It takes a relationship and a process.
2. Evangelizing postmodern people means starting farther back. The truth of what Christ accomplished on the cross is meaningless unless there are certain categories already in place. Who is he? They must understand that God is both a transcendent and personal God; that sin is sheer rebellion against that God; that there is a curse incurred for such rebellion; and that our sin is deep. Only then can the nature of salvation, the holiness, wrath and love of God begin to sound like good news. If you have no categories for God, sin and hell, you have no idea of your plight. You simply do not know that you need saving.
3. The only way to evangelize postmoderns is to do worldview evangelism. In establishing worldview evangelism, the evangelist must find a way into the values, heart, thought-patterns – worldview (It is not so much of building bridges as finding bridges into the other's frame of reference.) Then we must not let their postmodern worldview domesticate the Bible. They are incompatible. Postmoderns love pluralism. It would be easy to simply embrace Jesus into your pantheon. We must not allow that kind of domestication of Jesus. We must preach clearly and boldly the exclusivity of Jesus Christ.

Let's watch as Paul demonstrates evangelism to a kind of postmodern culture. Go with me to Paul's conversation with the intellectual elites in Athens on Mars Hill in Acts 17:16-34

¹ I am indebted to D.A. Carson, "Athens Revisited" in *Telling the Truth* (Zondervan, 2000), pp. 384-398.

¹⁶ Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols. ¹⁷ So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there. ¹⁸ Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him. And some said, “What does this babbler wish to say?” Others said, “He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities”—because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection. ¹⁹ And they took hold of him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, “May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? ²⁰ For you bring some strange things to our ears. We wish to know therefore what these things mean.” ²¹ Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new.

²² So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: “Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. ²³ For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, ‘To the unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. ²⁴ The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, ²⁵ nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. ²⁶ And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, ²⁷ that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, ²⁸ for

“‘In him we live and move and have our being’;

as even some of your own poets have said,

“‘For we are indeed his offspring.’

²⁹ Being then God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man. ³⁰ The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, ³¹ because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.”

³² Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked. But others said, “We will hear you again about this.” ³³ So Paul went out from their midst. ³⁴ But some men joined him and believed, among them Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them. .

First of all, notice...

The Culture Paul Faced

1. The Roman Empire was characterized by a government-sponsored religious pluralism. D.A. Carson says that the Romans knew that a captive people were more likely to rebel if they could align religion, land, and people. The thing that made the Romans so powerful was that they broke up this threefold chord by adopting the gods of their conquered foes into their own pantheon and encouraged their subjects to embrace certain gods from the Roman pantheon. Then if a civil war should erupt, no one could be certain whose side the gods would take. Thus, these god-swaps produced imperial peace for years.

So, v.16 says that Paul was disturbed by the number of idols in the city. One historian records that just 50 years after Paul, it was reported that it was easier to meet a god or goddess on the main street of Athens than it was to meet a person. The population was 10,000 people and there were some 30,000 statues in Athens 50 years after Paul. This gives us a good idea of what Paul saw.

2. The Athenians were not biblically illiterate as much as they were vociferously arguing for competing worldviews. Two are mentioned in the text: Epicureans and Stoics (v.18). The point is that Paul finds himself preaching to men and women who hold to worldviews that are diametrically opposed to Christianity. His task is formidable.
3. The Athenians possessed a condescending attitude toward Paul. In v. 18 they call him a “babbler.” The word literally means a “seed-picker.” It was used to refer to individuals who fluttered around town pecking the ground and picking up disconnected bits of one view or another and touted these views and philosophies as if they were experts. That is, they spoke authoritatively and passionately but with no understanding. That is what they thought of Paul’s views. So Paul enters this city with an incompatible worldview and he is going to proclaim to people who regard him as an irrelevant voice in the wind. I say again, his task was formidable.

Where does one start? How does one even begin the conversation? Well, as I said above, you have to find some way into their thought-processes. You have to find some seedbed of commonality. Notice two things Paul does to establish some common ground – two ways he builds a bridge into their conversations.

1. He compliments them as being very religious (cf. v.22).
2. He quotes their poets (cf. 28).

But...Getting into the conversation is not nearly as important as where you go with it once you’re in! He can’t begin with Christ. They have no concepts of God, sin, holiness, wrath and judgment. He has to begin farther back. How far back? All the way back! Notice the worldview he establishes.

(As we look at this address, remember that this is not the total address. It will take you two minutes to read it. This is likely Luke giving us his outline. The address likely lasted for an hour or so.)

The Worldview Paul Established

1. He provides categories for thinking about God.
 - a. God is creator (v.24a) – “Did you ever wonder where you came from?”

If God is the maker of all things, there is a lot of theology that can be expanded upon here. For example, we have to speak of God’s holiness. He is wholly other than everything else. He is a class to himself. We have to speak of God’s ownership of all

things and thus, man's accountability to him. Wow! What a starting point. He moves on by establishing that...

- b. God is sovereign (v.24b) – “He is Lord of heaven and earth.” “Why do things happen the way they do?” “Do you think everything that happens is simply random or is there a cause behind all things?”

This God who is maker of all things and Lord over heaven and earth is...

- c. God is transcendent (v.25a). He does not live here. You cannot confine him to an image, or house or box. His is not just transcendent but immense. He is limitless. (This is huge to Greeks that assigned the domain of a god to a certain sphere, i.e., sun, moon, sea, etc.) Man does not build God's domicile and man cannot serve him with his hands. Why? Because God is...

- d. God is self-sufficient (v.25b).

One of the greatest revelations to a postmoderns mind comes when you ask them to compare the requirements of everyone of the world's religions. In every other religion of the world, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, etc. is that the gods of these religions require their followers to work for the deity. But not the God of Christianity. God comes into the world and says he has done everything for us and we can supply him with nothing. That is earth-shattering and devastatingly true!

- e. God is the supplier of all things (v.25c). He gives you life and breath and all things.
- f. God is imminent and personal (v.28). We'll come back to it later as Paul presents it in his order. But Paul clearly establishes that this is a God who longs to be known. “If you could know God, would you want to be known by him?”

- 2. He provides categories for humanity – establishes that the nations descend from one man (v.26). God is not a tribal deity (as the Greeks believed); God is not racist. He is the God who made all mankind. There are profound implications here for establishing the God of the Bible to unreached people groups.
- 3. He provides categories for thinking about history and time (v.26b). Could it be that there is one God behind all that transpires in human history?
- 4. He provides category for beginning to think about sin (v.27) – without mentioning the word. Something has gone drastically wrong with humanity. Mankind has no knowledge of the very God who created them with the hopes that they would seek him.

Why do we not find this God? How is it that we know he is out there but don't know who he is? Something has gone awry.

More to the point, though, Paul defines the repulsiveness of idolatry to this kind of God (v.29). “Do you think that this all-powerful deity is to be likened to gold or silver? Or do you think he derives from man's imaginations?” He's touching on the reality of sin. This God can be offended.

Finally, with all of this established and doubtless, expanded upon, Paul is ready to...

- 5. He provides categories for understanding Christ, the Gospel, and Judgment – salvation (v.30f).

So how does Paul couch the Gospel in this kind of a framework?

The Gospel Paul Proclaims

1. Paul presents a big-picture Gospel. The smaller story of Jesus makes no sense separated from the larger story of salvation history. Similarly, postmoderns hate to have their individual narrative interpreted by a larger metanarrative. That is, they do not want their experience interpreted by a larger story.

If all we say is, “God loves you” divorced from the categories of creator, humanity, sin and judgment, it simply becomes a nice accommodation for postmodern pluralistic optimism.

2. Paul proclaims the heart of the Gospel – the resurrection.

Here we see Paul’s unmitigated boldness as he unflinchingly proclaims the heart of the gospel – the resurrection! He does so in the midst of a culture that believed all matter was evil. Thus, to proclaim that your God came back to life is totally absurd. But what the world thinks of the gospel is irrelevant to whether or not we proclaim it.

There is a lot of dialogue with postmoderns that caves-in. Enter – the emergent church! We can learn from mysticism, wicca, Hinduism and Eastern spirituality.

3. Paul urges his audience to repent.