

THE EVANGELICAL LIFE – PART 2

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What is the relationship between entering the lives of others and the effectiveness of our evangelism? What does it look like to speak the Gospel into the lives of others? How comfortable should we expect our evangelism to be (for us or our hearers)? What do we do if someone responds positively or negatively to the Gospel?

MAIN POINTS

1. Paul leaves us with an example of how to speak the gospel into our relationships (Acts 17:16-34).
2. Paul saw his “down time” as an opportunity to evangelize (v.16).
3. Paul felt no need to delay in speaking the gospel (v.17).
4. Paul contextualized the gospel for the athenians (v.22-23, 28-29).
5. Paul spoke the gospel (v.18, 24-31).

INTRODUCTION

Evangelism...what does it look like in practice?

Donald Whitney recounts the following story:

“I heard the story of a man who became a Christian during an evangelistic emphasis in a city in the Pacific Northwest. When he told his boss about it, his employer responded with, ‘That’s great! I am a Christian and have been praying for you for years!’

But the new believer was crestfallen. ‘Why didn’t you ever tell me?’ he asked. ‘You were the very reason I have not been interested in the gospel all these years.’

‘How can that be?’ the boss wondered. ‘I have done my very best to live the Christian life around you.’

‘That’s the point,’ explained the employee. ‘You lived such a model life without telling me that it was Christ who made the difference, I convinced myself that if you could live such a good and happy life without Christ, then I could too.’”

The point here is that we must, at some point, speak the gospel into our relationship. That is, through our relationships, no matter how close or intimate or servant oriented, no one can be saved. If someone is to be saved it will be because they have heard and responded to the gospel; not because they had fond enough feelings for us. But how do we go about bringing the gospel into our relationships? That’s what we are going to look at in this session.

PAUL LEAVES US WITH AN EXAMPLE OF HOW TO SPEAK THE GOSPEL INTO OUR RELATIONSHIPS (ACTS 17:16-34).

In Acts 17:16-34 we have a remarkable narrative account of the question in front of us. Let’s take a look at Paul’s example of speaking the gospel into our relationships. From this account I want to point out four practical principles that we can apply to our lives. Again, I want to make it clear that I do not think that this section of scripture is meant to be a “how to guide to evangelism”, but I do believe that it gives us a great look at what our evangelism might look like and a few principles that must guide us.

Acts 17:16-34 ¹⁶ Now while Paul was waiting for them [his friends and guides] 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 whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them.

PAUL SAW HIS "DOWN TIME" AS AN OPPORTUNITY TO EVANGELIZE (V.16)

Paul, burdened by the dead religiosity of the Athenians, felt (as we talked about yesterday) a love and a sadness and an earnestness as he waited for his friends.

We spoke on the need for intentionality at some length earlier, so we won't linger too long, but I do want to reiterate here, however, that that vast majority of all New Testament evangelistic encounters look like this (an individual, who already has the prompting of the Holy Spirit (the commands in scripture), feels a prompting (or unction) in their spirit to pursue the lost with the gospel). We must become this kind of people.

I want us to want every resident in the greater Wyoming area (and even those at the ends of the earth) to hear the gospel and be saved. And I want us to want to be willing to plan and scheme and plot and get creative in going about this.

We must become an intentionally evangelistic body.

PAUL FELT NO NEED TO DELAY IN SPEAKING THE GOSPEL (V.17)

A big question, especially in light of the last session is, "How long should we wait (in the context of our relationship-cultivating) before we begin gospel-sowing"? I want to be upfront about the fact that there is no definite answer to this question. I do, however, want to note five principles as you consider this:

1. In the New Testament evangelism narratives (including this one) there is no delay. This isn't a hard and fast rule, just a convicting truth.
2. There may be times (particularly when there is a high likelihood of seeing the individual(s) again) where it is best to build up a bit of a rapport with the individual.
3. Regardless of when we end up sharing the gospel with our friend, there must be, as we said earlier, an urgency to our evangelism.
4. God is sovereign and can use even the most awkward gospel presentation to save sinners.
5. Most of us wait too long. I have a neighbor who, to my shame, I have not shared the gospel with yet. It is now very awkward (having lived next to him for 10 years). My silence, I fear, will greatly affect the response of my neighbor to the gospel. If I truly believed the gospel (and the inherent urgency of it) how could I remain silent all these years?

In short, while we should always have a view to long-term discipleship in our evangelism (meaning that relationship-cultivating is an integral part of evangelism), generally speaking, the sooner that we can get the gospel to people, the better! That is, in our evangelism, we must learn (with the guidance of the Holy Spirit) to strike a balance between the facts that there is an inherent urgency about the Gospel and that many (in our culture particularly) will not listen to our message until we have earned the right to be heard and that God is sovereign.

What then, is the relationship between good relationship-cultivating and evangelistic effectiveness? Or, how important is it to have established a relationship with someone if we want our gospel presentations to be effective? In response to these questions I'd simply say this: 1) Speaking the gospel early establishes an important tone in the relationship; 2) Practically speaking, most don't respond to the gospel the first time they hear it no matter when you share it; 3) The fact that people often respond to the gospel more favorably within the context of a well cultivated relationship does not suggest that the relationship can't begin to be well cultivated with a gospel presentation.

Again, in short, chances are good that you will see more fruit from gospel-sowing in long-term, close relationships than you will from chance encounters, but sharing the gospel early allows for God to work through both possibilities while waiting only allows for the latter.

PAUL CONTEXTUALIZED THE GOSPEL FOR THE ATHENIANS (V.22-23, 28-29)

Note how, in verses 22-23 and 28-29 Paul very specifically and intentionally contextualizes the gospel for the Athenians. That is, he helped his audience to understand the gospel by using something familiar to them to relate the gospel to them. Here, Paul models the meaning of being in the world without being of the world. Paul did not condone the idols of the Athenians, but he did recognize and take advantage of them as a link to the truth.

Our ability to contextualize the Gospel for others in evangelism is an important tool that God seems pleased to use in drawing sinners to Himself.

Paul, "though he peremptorily refused to change his message to please men, he would go to any lengths in his presentation of it to avoid giving offence, and putting needless difficulties in the way of men's accepting and responding to it (1 Corinthians 9:19). Paul sought to save men; and because he sought to save them, he was not content merely to throw truth at them; but he went out of his way to get alongside them, and to start thinking with them from where they were, and to speak to them in terms that they could understand, and above all to avoid everything that would prejudice them against the gospel, and so put stumbling-blocks in their path" (Packer, Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God, p.52-53).

This means, if we are going to follow in Paul's footsteps, that we are going to have to do our best to get to know the individual with whom we are sharing the gospel as well as possible and, more importantly, we are going to have to know the gospel as well as possible. We should soak ourselves in the gospel. We should memorize it and meditate on it; first because of its intrinsic beauty, but also because by doing so we can tell of its relevance to single moms and drug addicts and selfish teenagers and grumpy old men and content suburbanites and oppressed minorities and proud intellectuals and with whomever God grants us opportunity.

I want to note one more thing in this section. We must be careful in our contextualization that we do not use inappropriate examples or fall into the world. J.I. Packer speaks well to this.

"It is a gross insult to God, and a real disservice to men, to cheapen and trivialize the gospel by one's presentation of it. Not that we should put on an affected solemnity when speaking of spiritual things; there is nothing more essentially frivolous than a mock seriousness, and nothing more likely to make hypocrites out of our hearers. What is needed is this: that we, who would speak for Christ, should pray constantly that God will put and keep in our hearts a sense of His greatness and glory, and of the joy of fellowship with him, and the dreadfulness of spending time and eternity without him; and then that God will enable us to speak honestly, straightforwardly, and just as we feel about these matters" (Packer, Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God, p.91).

Let us learn and love the gospel that we may speak it as helpfully as possible to all who will hear.

PAUL SPOKE THE GOSPEL (V.18, 24-31)

Finally, and most importantly, in this passage we see that Paul spoke the gospel.

How many times have we found ourselves babbling on about some apologetic technicality or some past religious experience or old lifestyle choices or even the difference that God has made in our lives without ever sharing the gospel?

Eventually we must get to the gospel.

Without implying that the bible provides a neat 3 or 4-step process for speaking the gospel into our relationships I do want to address the question of how we transition from an initial conversation (or perhaps a series of initial conversations) to the gospel, or how we move from relationship-cultivating to **gospel-sowing** (definition below), in a manner consistent with God's word. Consider J.I. Packer's words in this regard:

"The principle is that the best method of evangelism is the one which serves the gospel most completely. It is the one which bears the clearest witness to the divine origin of the message, and the life-and-death character of the issues which it raises it is the one which makes possible the most full and thorough explanation of the good news of Christ and His cross, and the most exacting and searching application of it. It is the one which most effectively engages the minds of those to whom witness is born, and makes them most vividly aware that the gospel is God's word, addressed personally to them in their own situation" (Packer, Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God, p.90-91).

So how do we do this? First, I'd like to give you a definition.

Definition: Gospel-sowing is the aspect of evangelism in which one speaks the gospel into relationships with non-Christians out of love for and commitment to their souls, springing from love for and obedience to Jesus Christ.

What this means is that at the very heart of gospel-sowing is sharing our satisfaction in God with non-Christians in order that they too might love Him with all of their hearts. However, many among us are not sure how to turn an everyday conversation or encounter toward the gospel in a natural way (not that it feeling “natural” is all that important). Here are some practical examples of how to do this:

1. Begin to sow the gospel by asking questions.
 - a. What do you think happens when you die?
 - b. Who or what do you think God is?
 - c. Is it possible to have a friendship with God?
 - d. What do you think God wants from you?
 - e. How can we know about God?
 - f. Do you think of yourself as a pretty good person?
 - g. How do you think God feels about sin?
 - h. How do you think God decides who goes to heaven and who goes to hell?
 - i. How would you define a Christian (or Christianity)?
 - j. Plant by changing your answers to common questions.
 - k. Do you believe that it is possible to have a friendship with God?
 - l. What do you think God wants from you?
 - m. Can I pray for you?

*“Whether with someone you’re around frequently or with someone you’ve met for the first time, the best way I’ve found to turn the conversation toward spiritual matters is to ask the person how you can pray for him or her. Although it’s almost routine to the Christian, most non-Christians don’t know anyone who is praying for them” (Donald Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines*, p.109).*

2. Begin to sow by painting word pictures.
 - a. Romans 6:23
 - b. Holiness ladder
 - c. Traffic ticket
 - d. Encounters with Jesus
 - e. Penalty for sin chart
3. Begin to sow by sharing your testimony. Everyone should be able to share their testimony in 5 minutes or less. This can be one of the most powerful evangelistic tools when done rightly (it must include the gospel).

HAND OUT TESTIMONY WORKSHEET

4. Begin to sow by changing your answers to common questions
 - a. What do you do for a living?
 - b. How's it going?
 - c. What are you doing this weekend? How was your weekend?
 - d. What do you want to be when you grow up?
 - e. Did you see the game?
 - f. How have you been feeling?
 - g. Did you read that article in the newspaper?
 - h. How about the weather?
5. Begin to sow by partnering with the church.
 - a. Invite your non-Christian friend to a church-sponsored outreach event.
 - b. Invite your neighbors or friends or family or coworkers over to hear the gospel and ask questions based on the presentation of another (Pastor, more mature or articulate Christian, video, etc.).

The idea behind each of the five categories above is to help you transition from common situations to a gospel presentation. Please keep in mind however that none of these things, by themselves, are a gospel presentation. Please, please be clear on the gospel. One way that you can gauge yourself in this is to see if you can share the contents of the Knowing God tract in five minutes or less without looking at the tract.

KNOWING GOD TRACT - GO THROUGH TRACT

Ultimately, people need the gospel, not some clever illustrations or cute stories or catchy anecdotes. Like Paul, we must be people who speak the gospel.

IT WAS NOT PAUL WHO DETERMINED THE ATHENIANS RESPONSE (V.32-34)

Finally, I want to offer a simple reminder that it was not Paul (and it is not us) who determined the outcome of his evangelism. Despite his best efforts (in eloquence, prayer, boldness, contextualization, etc.), God saw fit that “some mocked, but some men joined him and believed”.

Share the gospel and share it often. Share it intentionally, share it early on, contextualize it, but share it. For it is the gospel that is the power of God unto salvation for all who believe!

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. What has been your experience with planting seeds of truth?
2. How have you found it difficult/easy to plant seeds of truth?
3. Would you say that your planting flows from an overwhelming satisfaction in God and love for His children? Why/not?
4. What is the role of the church in assisting you in planting?
5. In what specific areas would you like help in planting?

I want to close this session by addressing two final questions, what if they say “no” and what if they say “yes”.

WHAT TO DO IF THEY SAY, “NO?”

What happens if you have cultivated a relationship with a non-Christian friend, shared the Gospel with your friend, and called your friend to respond to the Good News, yet they have rejected (explicitly or implicitly) Jesus offer of salvation? Because this happens more often than not, it is important to be prepared to handle it when it does.

1. Pray for yourself and your friend. Salvation is a spiritual matter. That is, unless the Holy Spirit works, the Father draws, and Jesus forgives, nothing will happen. Salvation is not up to us. We are blessed that God allows us to be a part of the process. However, we are only conduits of grace, not generators of grace.
2. Keep at it. Galatians 6:9 says, “Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.” Practically speaking, most of your non-Christian friends will probably reject the Gospel the first time that you share it with them. It may take weeks or months or even decades of faithful prayer and sharing before God opens your friend’s heart and mind up to know His glory. It is important that you are prepared to faithfully endure. Sharing our faith will cost us. It will cost us time, comfort, and money. But, for the joy set before us we must endure.
3. Continue relationship-cultivating, gospel-sowing, and calling your friend to respond to the truth. Evangelism is not a one shot deal. If your friend does not respond to the Gospel immediately, keep at it.
4. Determine what is keeping your friend from trusting in Jesus’ offer of forgiveness. People accept and reject the Gospel for a myriad of reasons. Helping your friend to determine why he or she does not believe Jesus will go a long way in overcoming those obstacles.
5. Do your best to help your friend overcome any obstacles in their way. The process of helping your friend overcome spiritual obstacles is known as apologetics (defending the faith). Familiarize yourself with the many apologetic resources out there.

Again, evangelism is often a difficult venture. This should not surprise us though, as Jesus Himself promised us that this would be the case. Never-the-less, because of the grace that we have received we are privileged and obligated to share God’s grace with all mankind. As such, it is imperative that we be as prepared as possible. We must humbly and dependently pray, faithfully endure, continue sharing, do our best to determine what obstacles are in our friends way, and do everything that we can to help our friends overcome those obstacles.

In all of this, it is important to understand that if your friends reject the Gospel it is God that they are rejecting, not you. Do not let apparent fruitless evangelism discourage you. Every time the Gospel is spoken, there is more going on in the spiritual realm than we could possibly imagine.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Has anyone ever rejected all or part of your evangelism efforts?
2. How does your fear of rejection affect your evangelistic efforts?
3. What is the worst kind of rejection that you can imagine?
4. How can we, as a church, support you in your evangelism?

WHAT IF THEY SAY, “YES?”

Imagine that you have just shared the Gospel with a friend you have been praying for and building a relationship with for over a year. She tracked well with you throughout your entire explanation of the Good News. She asked great questions. She listened with an interest and intensity that had not been there previously. And now...you ask, “Do you believe? Are you ready to accept Jesus’ offer of forgiveness?” A nervous smile fills her face and she exclaims, “YES!” With a great sense of awe and wonder you thank God, hug your friend, and...and...and...and what? What do you do if a friend says yes?

1. Praise God! John 6:44 tells us that a sinner coming to Christ is a miracle. Take this opportunity to delight in the redemptive power, mercy, love, kindness, and goodness of God. Worship God together.
2. Set up a (regular) time to meet with her to help her understand and grow in her new faith. Just as a newborn baby needs constant care and attention in order to thrive, so does a new believer. The work is not over when your friend says, “Yes”. In fact, the hard work is just beginning. If you are going to accept the responsibility of sharing your faith you must also accept the responsibility of walking with the new believer in his or her new faith.

We recommend that you begin to read through the book of John or Romans and begin taking your friend through Grace Church’s “Follow Me” (part 1 and 2) booklets.

3. Encourage her to tell others about her new faith in Christ. Evangelism isn’t only for pastors or “veteran” Christians. Anyone who believes that the Gospel is truly good news has a responsibility and privilege to share it. Help her to think through the people in her life that she will share with and then go for it!
4. Get her connected with the Church. It is especially important to get a new believer baptized, plugged into a discipleship group, communicate their decision to the Pastor and/or elders, give them an opportunity to serve others, and to worship God corporately.

CONCLUSION

It is an exciting time in the life of the church when, by grace, through faith, a sinner is born again. It is also a great time of responsibility. God has charged His Church to care for the spiritual infants that He draws to Himself. We must take this responsibility seriously, as individuals and as leaders in the Church. Our spiritual nurture must be gentle, loving, intentional, purposeful, and Biblical. It will not do to “experiment” with the spiritual life of another. We must be prepared.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. What was it like for you when you first became a Christian? Who helped you grow in your faith? What did your church offer to assist you?
2. How prepared to you feel to look after a new convert? What will you do if one of the people that you are praying for accepts Christ?
3. What are we doing well as a Church to assist you in caring for new Christians? What are we doing poorly?
4. How can we better help you to get ready to care for new believers? What can we do to better assist you in caring for new believers?