

The Message of Evangelism

Acts 17:15-34 So those who conducted Paul brought him to Athens; and receiving a command for Silas and Timothy to come to him with all speed, they departed. ¹⁶ ¶ Now while Paul waited for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him when he saw that the city was given over to idols. ¹⁷ Therefore he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and with the Gentile worshipers, and in the marketplace daily with those who happened to be there. ¹⁸ Then certain Epicurean and Stoic philosophers encountered him. And some said, "What does this babbler want to say?" Others said, "He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign gods," because he preached to them Jesus and the resurrection. ¹⁹ And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, "May we know what this new doctrine is of which you speak?" ²⁰ "For you are bringing some strange things to our ears. Therefore we want to know what these things mean." ²¹ For all the Athenians and the foreigners who were there spent their time in nothing else but either to tell or to hear some new thing. ²² ¶ Then Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, "Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are very religious; ²³ "for as I was passing through and considering the objects of your worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Therefore, the One whom you worship without knowing, Him I proclaim to you: ²⁴ "God, who made the world and everything in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands. ²⁵ "Nor is He worshiped with men's hands, as though He needed anything, since He gives to all life, breath, and all things. ²⁶ "And He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their preappointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings, ²⁷ "so that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; ²⁸ "for in Him we live and move and have our being, as also some of your own poets have said, 'For we are also His offspring.' ²⁹ ¶ "Therefore, since we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, something shaped by art and man's devising. ³⁰ "Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent, ³¹ "because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead." ³² ¶ And when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked, while others said, "We will hear you again on this matter." ³³ So Paul departed from among them. ³⁴ However, some men joined him and believed, among them Dionysius the Areopagite, a woman named Damaris, and others with them.

For about 150 years now, we have been taught that there is something called 'the news'. What is 'the news'? "The news" is what the newspapers, TV and radio stations and Internet websites decide it is. For that day. Of for that hour, in fact. So we religiously tune in, because, you know, we must know 'what is happening in the world. And we must be informed. And the TV newsreader in a serious voice with a serious face tells us that 'the news' for the day is five things: there is a major strike on at the moment, a corruption scandal has been uncovered, interest rates might be cut, Michael Jackson's doctor was responsible for his death, and the Bulls are due to play the Sharks. And so conditioned are to this little game, we don't stop to ask, why should these events be considered 'the news'? What about the five major wars that are going on at the moment? Why not the state of politics in the state of Panama? Why not the result of the local primary school soccer game? Why not the fact that the local Bridge club is having a meeting on Tuesday night? And of course, tomorrow night, they will have completely forgotten what was 'the news' last night. No, tonight there is a whole new set of events that you need to know to be informed. That was Monday's news, this is Tuesday's news.

The idea that a bunch of media people can select some arbitrary event, in a world where billions of events are going on, package it and then tell you in mock-seriousness that this is what you need to know is actually quite ridiculous. And in the middle of telling you about an epidemic of swine flue that is killing people, they take a break so you can watch ads about washing powder, baby diapers and beer.

"The news' is really about selling ads, or more accurately, selling people to the advertisers. Because there is something in us which wants to hear what is new, and what is happening. Nothing wrong with that. It is just that the 'news' is a pretty arrogant way of referring to itself. It might better be called 'some stories you might be interested in'.

But in fact, there is something in the world which could accurately be called 'the news'. There is some news which is timeless, permanent, and relevant for all people every day. It is also a story,

dealing with a real event, which people need to know to be informed. It is vital that they know this news.

The Greek word for good news was *eungellion*, from which we get the English word *evangelism*. Connected to that came the old English word God-spell, or good news. The gospel is the good news. Rising far above the endless stories that people hear every day, there is one story more important than all the others. There is one message, one piece of news they need to hear, and it is the gospel message.

It is absolutely critical that we understand the content of that message. If we are messengers, reporters, to use the modern idea – journalists who report the news, we must have the message straight. People's lives depend on it.

Galatians 1:6-9 I marvel that you are turning away so soon from Him who called you in the grace of Christ, to a different gospel, ⁷ which is not another; but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. ⁸ But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed. ⁹ As we have said before, so now I say again, if anyone preaches any other gospel to you than what you have received, let him be accursed.

Paul himself gives us a very clear example of what the message of the gospel is to include from a record of one of his sermons in Acts 17. This is probably a summarised version of his sermon, he probably spoke a lot longer and said a lot more. But the account in Acts 17 takes out the key statements of Paul, and from it, we see a very clear gospel message.

Paul was in Athens, the great city of Greek culture and religion. He was actually supposed to just wait for his companions to arrive. But while in the city, he was increasingly disturbed by all the idols he saw. So he eventually starts speaking to people in the synagogue and in the marketplace. Word of his message comes to the philosophers who like to sit on Mars Hill and hear new theories of life. They call him to come and tell them his theory. As we examine his sermon, we find six key truths about the message of the gospel, which we must bring to others when we share the message.

I. God's existence and nature

Acts 17:24 God, who made the world and everything in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands.

The first and primary message of the gospel is that there is a God who created the world. Not many gods. Not the time and chance of evolution. Not the endless reincarnation of Hinduism. There is one God and He made everything.

Now today you will meet many people who deny this basic point. But the Bible says that every man in his heart knows that God is the Creator.

Romans 1:19-21 because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown it to them. ²⁰ For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse, ²¹ because, although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened.

I'm not convinced by atheism. I find too many atheists willing to get angry at the God they say doesn't exist. Doug Wilson says that atheism has two tenets. One, God does not exist. Two, I hate Him.

God existence is seen in creation, and it is also seen in humanity.

We know that we are different from the rest of creation. As much as these nature shows try to make out that we are an advanced parasite, draining the resources of pure Mother Earth, the clear truth is that we were made to rule the earth. That's because we were made in God's image. Being made in His image means we think, and feel, and choose. We have personality, and morality. We question, and seek answers. We discover. We create.

Most of all, we have a conscience that says, this ought to be done, and this ought not to be done. But where did we get that sense of *ought* from?

As we look inside ourselves we see God's fingerprints. We are persons, moral persons because God is a moral person.

That's part of what Paul is trying to get across to the Athenians. Not only is God the Creator, he is the personal Creator.

Acts 17:25-29 Nor is He worshiped with men's hands, as though He needed anything, since He gives to all life, breath, and all things. ²⁶ "And He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their preappointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings, ²⁷ "so that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; ²⁸ "for in Him we live and move and have our being, as also some of your own poets have said, 'For we are also His offspring.' ²⁹ ¶ "Therefore, since we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, something shaped by art and man's devising.

Now if the only true God is a person, then that means we have some kind of responsibility. He is not something impersonal like a stone or a tree or mother Earth, where it doesn't matter what you do, as long as you don't hurt the flowers. No, if God is a person, then He can be known, and He knows you. Then He has expectations of us, or He wouldn't have made us.

That's the second part of the gospel.

II. Man's condemned position

Acts 17:29-31 Therefore, since we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, something shaped by art and man's devising. ³⁰ "Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent, ³¹ "because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained.

Paul tells the Greeks that man's idolatry has been ignorant and something to be repented of. That means man has been on the wrong track and need to turn around and get on the right track. He also tells them that there is a deadline for this choice. One day, there will be a day of judgement. On that day, a standard of righteousness or justice will be used to judge every human being who has ever lived.

Romans 3:23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,

John 3:18 "He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.

That's the hardest part of the gospel to deliver: God is a holy God, and you have failed to be holy from your earliest years. It feels very natural to you to sin, but it is still a breaking of God's law, no matter how reasonable and natural and guiltless you feel about it. God says it is evil, and therefore it is. He makes the laws. The bad news is, you were born into Somebody else's house, and all you have ever done since you were born is mess on the carpet.

You have been born into a world where rule number 1 is be God-centred and love Him. But in your blindness and deadness and rebellion you have loved yourself, placed yourself at the centre and acted like God does not exist.

You can keep living on borrowed time, like a tenant who refuses to pay his rent. But there is coming a day of reckoning.

It's hard to tell people that, especially in a world where every man is right in his own eyes, where morals are relative, where ethics are situational, where every man has his own personal truth. But as much as people claim there is no such thing as sin, notice how outraged they are if you lie about them, steal from them, kill their dog, or act arrogant in their presence. Why should they be angry, if they believe there are no moral absolutes? When I steal from, it's not wrong for me. When I kill their dog, it's not wrong for me. You get the point. People become very dogmatic when the sin bites them. It is only when the sin benefits them that they want to say it is neither black nor white. Sometimes you need to show people this, by appealing to their conscience. Remind them of the do unto others rule, because in truth, they live by it. Inconsistently, but they still have it. Bring to their mind the 10 commandments. Bring to their mind their lack of love for their neighbour.

You say, "Must we really say all this uncomfortable stuff about sin? Can't we just jump to the good news about Jesus?" You can't interest a man in a cure, until he is completely convinced that he is sick.

This is what Jesus did with the rich young ruler. He tried to prod the man to seeing his self-righteousness. He wasn't going to tell him about forgiveness, until the man realised he needed some.

Part of telling a person about man's condemned state is to tell him or her about man's helpless state. We are not only sinful, but unable to fix the problem ourselves. We cannot right our wrongs by doing more right than wrong. We cannot be righteous enough in God's sight. We cannot use the things of religion to impress God. We cannot avoid the serious sins and hope to hide behind the Hitlers and Stalins on the day of judgement. We cannot become righteous by our own deeds.

Ephesians 2:8-9 For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, ⁹ not of works, lest anyone should boast.

III. The person and work of Jesus Christ

Acts 17:31 because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead."

Paul takes people from the existence of God, to their fallen state, to the Person of Jesus Christ. This is the natural result of showing people the hopelessness of their state.

1 Corinthians 15:1-4 Moreover, brethren, I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand, ² by which also you are saved, if you hold fast that word which I preached to you -- unless you believed in vain. ³ For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, ⁴ and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures,

Jesus Christ died for our sins and rose again. That's the gospel. But those facts need to be interpreted. Who is Jesus? Why did He die? What does it mean that He died for our sins? Why did He rise from the dead?

If we get this wrong, we get it all wrong.

2 Corinthians 11:3-4 But I fear, lest somehow, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, so your minds

may be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ. ⁴ For if he who comes preaches another Jesus whom we have not preached, or if you receive a different spirit which you have not received, or a different gospel which you have not accepted -- you may well put up with it!

Jesus is the eternal Son of God. He was not made; He is the Creator. He entered humanity in by being born of a virgin, so that He could be fully God and fully man. Therefore, he lived a sinless life. When he died, He was dying as the substitute sinner. He was dying to take our penalty, pay our debt, experience God's wrath for us, while offering up His sinless life. When he rose again, it proved that he had not sinned Himself, and that God had accepted His offering. Jesus Christ now stands as the priest who stands as the mediator between God and man, being the God-man Himself.

I don't doubt that there are thousands, maybe millions of people who have attached themselves to the idea of Jesus, or the name of Jesus, without being at all interested in who is behind the name, or if their idea of Jesus is correct.

Matthew 7:21-23 Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. ²² 'Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?' ²³ 'And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!'

IV. Faith

When Paul shares the gospel, he is making it clear that the position of his hearers needs to change. He is telling them that they have been wrong and that they need to turn to one who can save them.

There's a tendency today to make the gospel out to be something other than what it is. There is a desire to make the gospel into something less than making offensive sinners acceptable to God. But in so doing, we lose the gospel.

The gospel is not about social renovation. The gospel is not primarily food to the hungry, money to the poor, employment to the unemployed, social advance for the oppressed. It might result in such benefits, but such things do not constitute the intention or purpose of the Gospel.

It is not about social revolution. The gospel is not a paradigm for the revolt against forms of political tyranny or oppression as Liberation Theology in our own country suggested.

It is not about a psychological innovation. The gospel does not provide some kind of internal therapy to affirm 'the self' or to liberate you from 'misplaced shame'.

It is not about moral influence. The gospel is not simply a revelation of God's love teaching people to sacrificially love one another.

It is not about a potential supply of grace, which by human merit and cooperation (and about a thousand years in purgatory), we access and experience.

It is not about realising your own godhood, coming to worship the divine within.

The gospel is not some extra bit of spirituality that you can weave into your own personalised religion, where you have a bit of this and bit of that, and you include the sinner's prayer into your big personal scrapbook of religion.

The Bible's key words when it comes to the gospel are *justification, salvation, reconciliation, propitiation, redemption*. Those words tell you what the Bible regards to be the heart of the gospel.

Reconciliation says the gospel is about an offended God, and the offenders who need to be reconciled.

Justification says the gospel is about a Judge and criminals who need to be acquitted.

Forgiveness says the gospel is about a glorious God and people hopelessly in debt, who need to be

forgiven.

Propitiation says the gospel is about a God who hates sin and is angry at sinners, who need to be made pleasing to an angry God.

Salvation says the gospel is about sinners drowning in the effects of their own sin, who need to be rescued.

Redemption says the gospel is about slaves to sin who need to be bought back by God.

What do these all have in common? They say, God is right, we are wrong. We are helpless and need His help. They all say, only Jesus Christ could do it. Only Jesus can be the mediator between God and man. Only Jesus' death and life can pay your penalty and grant you His righteousness. Only Jesus has appeased the anger of the Father.

You don't need to share every one of these ideas when you share the gospel, but the main idea of one or some of them has to be there: sinners who need to be pardoned, rescued, acquitted, bought, by a merciful God on the basis of Jesus Christ.

So once you have taught a person the truth of God and His nature, about man's condemned state, about the person and work of Jesus Christ, about the need to be reconciled to God through Jesus Christ, you can teach a person what he or she must do.

Acts 17:30 Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent,

Paul makes it very clear that the response which God expects is repentance. Whenever the gospel message comes to its climax, the response is simple: repent and believe.

Acts 16:30-31 And he brought them out and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" ³¹ So they said, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household."

Repentance and faith are like two sides of one coin. To repent of sin is to turn away from it. But when you turn away from something, you are turning towards something else. If you turn away from the left, then you are turning to the right. Repentance is one side, believing or faith is the other. If you have explained the gospel message clearly enough, it will be quite clear what you mean by repentance and faith.

Repentance says, I know I have not loved God or lived for God. I have lived as His enemy, as His debtor, as a criminal. I have failed to honour Him, worship Him, love Him, know Him. I deserve every punishment God might give me. I have lived contrary to God, and I no longer want to do that. I am turning away from living life with myself at the centre. I am turning away from my sin, and my selfishness and evil. I don't want it any more.

Faith says, only Jesus Christ can make me acceptable to God. Only Jesus Christ can satisfy the Father. Only Jesus Christ can pay my sin debt. Only Jesus Christ's righteousness will save me from hell. Only Jesus Christ's Person, because of His death and resurrection can save Me. So now, I come to Him, and I ask Him to save me. I call on Him, lean on Him, come to Him, receive Him. I ask Him, forgive me., receive me, reconcile me, save me. Become my new life.

Whether the person expresses that repentance and faith in a prayer with you or by themselves, the gospel message is not complete until they see that they must respond to God decisively.

Romans 10:9-10 that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. ¹⁰ For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with

the mouth confession is made unto salvation.

Paul's whole message to the Athenians is themed around worship. He says you worship the unknown God. I'll tell you who you worship ignorantly. You can't worship Him as if He needs you, because He isn't that way. But you ought to seek him and worship Him, and repent of idolatry and begin worshipping Him, and Him alone, instead of all these gods.

The point that Paul makes is, God wants to save you out of your idolatry so that you can worship Him alone.

That's the point of the gospel.

Why does God save people? Is he trying to give selfish people an eternal vacation in heaven? Does He want to save idolaters from the consequences of their idolatry? Does God want sinners to have a ticket to heaven to carry around in their back-pocket?

No. God's intention is to save sinners from themselves. He wants to save them from the worst possible condition: God-hatred. He wants to turn them into worshippers. He wants to restore them to what Adam had: fellowship with God. From there, heaven is just the consummation.

God is in the business of transforming people who are radically self-centred into people who are God-centred. This is the good news: God will not only pardon you for loving yourself more than Him, but He will give you a new heart that will love Him, and then He will give you Himself.

That's the best news in the world to people whose eyes have been opened to see that loving yourself instead of God is like loving the view from a speed bump instead of the view from Mt. Everest.

So the message of the gospel is: God is going to transform you and make you into a new creature that loves Christ more than self, and that obeys Him and seeks Him and follows Him.

That is what He is offering you.

You see, if you don't want God Himself, you definitely won't want heaven. In fact, I'll suggest something quite radical. If your heart still hates God, hell would actually be preferable over an eternity in heaven. Or to put it another way, if you hate God and are forced to spend an eternity with Him, then heaven would be hell for you. So the gospel is not about eternal retirement options. It is not about getting all the carnal delights you couldn't get your hands on now. It is not fire insurance. It is getting God.

Let me say some things which are not often said. This gospel message cannot be reduced to anything less. If you take out any of the points we have mentioned, you no longer have a gospel. You cannot have the gospel message if you remove God's existence. If you remove sin, the good news is no longer good news, because there is no bad news in the first place. If you take away from the person and work of Jesus Christ, you end up with another gospel, a false gospel leaning on a non-saviour. If you make this anything less than reconciliation or acquittal, people will misunderstand what is going on. If you take away from what God calls for from human beings, by making it less than repentance and faith, or if you add to it and include water baptism, confirmation, church membership or anything like that, you no longer have the gospel. If you imply that this is just a spiritual mantra to say to hedge your bets on Christianity along with all the other religions, you have not taught the gospel. These six truths are not like six pillars, so that if you miss one, the others are still standing. They are like six intertwined strands of a spider's web, so that if you pull one out, you rip all the others out at the same time.

But having said that, let me add something else. Not every conversation enables us to mention all five. In fact, perhaps most will not. You cannot talk about Jesus Christ to a man who denies God's existence. That's where you have to start. You cannot speak about grace, if a man denies that he is a sinner. You have to lay a foundation one brick at a time – God's existence, man's rebellion, Jesus

Christ's work, the need to be justified, the need to repent and believe, and the result.

Some people have been prepared by God to accept all the message of the gospel in one go. Other people have to be convinced one point at a time. That means you can be patient. Being a witness is not about trying to get everyone to hear the whole story and blurt out a sinner's prayer. You are there to declare the truth, whether they believe it or not. You are there to tell them what the Bible says. You are there to reason with them, to call them to repentance, to plead with them, to debate with them, no all in one go. It may take many, many meetings. It may take years. You do not put all your stock in one conversation. You keep working on people. You keep trying to gain ground. Have they accepted there must be a God? Then move on to His holiness and our law-breaking. Have they accepted that they are sinful and God is holy, then move on to the need for forgiveness. Do they want to be forgiven? Then move on the Christ's work. Do they desire His work? Then tell them what it is to repent, believe and follow Christ all their lives? Do they want to do that? Then show them the promises to those who do.

Journalists can do a lot of damage if they report wrongly, or if they deliberately change the facts. So can preachers and Christians, if they deliver a false hope. Positively speaking, there is no greater privilege than to share the pure message of the gospel with others.