

Preaching the Gospel in a Postmodern Context
“Paul and the Athenians”

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Introduction:

As ambassadors for Christ, we are to go into the world and beseech men to be reconciled to God. However, if we are going to accomplish that objective, then we must have some understanding of the cultural context that surrounds us – we must discern our times. A review of the history and characteristics of Postmodern culture quickly reveals that the Postmodern worldview is very different from the worldview which prevailed during the ministries of our spiritual fathers and grandfathers. Clearly this is not our fathers’ world!

One of the key differences between our society and theirs is that in Modernity people knew about the God they rejected whereas Postmodern society is largely ignorant about the basic tenets of the Christian faith. Our fathers’ task was to present an apologetic for a rejected Christianity. Our task is to present an apologetic for an unknown and unfamiliar Christianity. This is particularly important for the preaching task. As one contemporary apologist observed,

We can no longer assume our preaching takes place within a more or less “Christian” culture. The great narratives of Judeo-Christian belief, the pivotal stories of the Bible’s characters, the events of the life and ministry of Jesus Christ are either not known or do not carry the meaning-making significance they did for previous generations. Bible knowledge, Christian doctrine, and theological reflection must be presented and re-presented from America’s pulpits - yes, even to American Christians.¹

He is not alone in his concern. The lack of basic Bible knowledge among confessing Christians is being noted by Christian educators and authors in almost every forum for discourse available. Woodrow Kroll of the Back to the Bible radio program observed that even secular humorists are using Biblical ignorance to create material for their shows. He cites a recent episode of *The Tonight Show* with host Jay Leno. Here is the account in Kroll’s own words:

¹Craig A. Loscalzo, *Apologetic Preaching: Proclaiming Christ to a Postmodern World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 24.

One bit Leno does is hilarious, or at least would be if it were not so tragic. He goes out to the streets and questions unsuspecting passersby about the Bible. The questions are not hard; in fact, they are designed to be easy. That's where the laughs come in.

Leno asks with a twinkle in his eye, "Name one of the Ten Commandments." Answer: "God helps those who help themselves." The audience laughs. Leno asks someone else, "Can you name on of the apostles?" There is no reply. He continues, "Okay, then, name the four Beatles." Immediate response: "George, Paul, John, and Ringo." The crowd cheers. Leno moves on to another victim and says, "Let me ask you a few questions about the Bible." Answer: "Oh, I don't know much about the Bible." Leno asks, "Well, can you tell me, according to the Bible, who was swallowed by a great fish?" Answer: "Pinocchio." The audience roars. The bit continues, and it only gets worse.²

The traditional role of Christian apologetics was always to defend the Christian faith against attacks from unbelievers. While this will continue to be necessary in any cultural context, Postmodern culture mandates an additional aspect that must be considered and incorporated into our attempts to do apologetics in a Postmodern society. Not only must we be prepared to defend Christianity against the attacks mounted by her enemies, we must now contend with presenting and defending a Christian belief system to a culture that is largely ignorant of its most basic doctrinal tenets. Christianity in this culture is largely misunderstood or not understood at all. It is not that its claims have been carefully considered and rejected – they are virtually unknown. Christians will face the same struggle that the cults now face. The average person rejects Mormonism without any real knowledge (correct or incorrect) about the elements that comprise the belief system of that particular cult. Those who reject Christianity do not do so on the basis of fair evaluation but rather simply because they do not wish to consider Christianity at all. Even more frightening than the basis on which Christianity is rejected is the uncritical basis upon which it is received by many. Just as there are many who have accepted Mormonism because they like the family based values presented by the marketing strategy of the Mormon church, there are many people who have accepted Christianity without knowing what true biblical Christianity really is.

How is the contemporary Church to minister redemptively and biblically in a Postmodern culture? How are we to thrive and not merely survive in our world? If we are going to stand for God in a world that has largely forgotten what He is like or that He even exists, then we are going to have to formulate a biblical response to the prevailing worldview of our cultural context. One important key to all of this is learning how to effectively preach the timeless message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to a society that for the most part has no meaningful understanding why they stand in need of His saving message.

²*Back to the Bible* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Press, 2000), 43.

There has been an avalanche of material written in recent days that addresses this very topic. There are many unique and culturally sensitive methodologies that are suggested if one wishes to be effective in reaching what has come to be called the PoMo generation. However, in all that is being suggested, there is shockingly few references to the New Testament model of evangelism and Gospel proclamation. The New Testament evidence reveals at least six distinct and various means of communicating the message of the Gospel to a lost and dying world. There can be little doubt that these means were effective in radically impacting the culture and society of the day.

1. At times the Gospel presentation was theologically structured as seen in Peter's presentation at Pentecost (Acts 2:14-16).
2. At times the presentation of the Gospel was primarily testimonial in nature as was the case with Paul's witness to Agrippa (Acts 26:1-32) and the Samaritan woman (John 4:39-42).
3. At times the presentation of the Gospel was given through historically shaped accounts as seen in Paul's message at Antioch (Acts 13:16-41).
4. The Gospel was at times seen as a philosophically driven presentation such as Paul's preaching on Mars Hill (Acts 17:22-31).
5. The parable of the kingdom presents the Gospel in narrative or story presentation (Matthew 13).
6. Some Gospel presentations were conversational in nature as was the case with Nicodemus (John 3) or the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4).

One theologian who has devoted considerable time and energy to understanding and evaluating the philosophy of Postmodernism in light of the Scriptures is D. A. Carson. He addresses the issue of preaching the Gospel to a Postmodern society in a chapter of a book he edited entitled *Telling the Truth: Evangelizing PostModerns*. I have adapted his title "Athens Revisited," and much of what follows reflects his presentation of a Biblical model for Gospel ministry in and to a Postmodern world.

The first-century Church was commissioned to preach the Gospel to a world similar to ours. They faced many similar challenges and thrived. They managed to present a simple, effective, powerful, dynamic, authentic, and life-impacting witness and so powerful was the impact of their witness that it had profound impact for change in their generation and for those who followed after.

Perhaps no character in the New Testament better depicts ministry in a pluralistic and hostile environment than the Apostle Paul. One of his ministry encounters in particular, his Athenian encounter, best depicts the challenges he faced and the strategies he employed in attempting to evangelize a group of highly intelligent but biblically illiterate people.

I. The Realities Paul Faced

- A. The Roman and Greek World was dominated by Pluralism.
- B. The people he was evangelizing had a strong affinity for powerfully-established and deeply-entrenched worldviews that were competing and contradictory to the Gospel.
- C. He faced the sneering condescension of those who held opposing views (Acts 17:18).

II. The Priorities Paul Adopts

- A. A God-centered cultural analysis - he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols (17:16).

He did not evaluate the city based on its architecture, its learning, or its wealth. He evaluated from God's perspective - it was full of idols.

- B. A theologically based persistent evangelism of both biblically literate and illiterate people.

He evangelized the Jews and God-fearing Greeks at the synagogue (17:17) as well as the biblically illiterate philosophers on Mars Hill (17:18).

III. The Framework Paul Establishes (17:22-31)

- A. He establishes that God is the creator of the universe and is separate from His creation (17:24).
- B. He stresses the sovereignty of God Who is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not dwell in temples built by hands (17:24).
- C. He establishes that God is self-existent and self-sufficient - He is not served by human hands as if He needed anything (17:25).

- D. We, on the other hand, are utterly dependent on God - He Himself gives all men life and breath (17:25).
- E. We are all descendants of one man (17:26), and we share a universal problem. (He will later share a universal solution - the Gospel)
- F. He introduces the idea that something is profoundly wrong in this universe that God created and that He rules - His purpose was that some would reach out and find Him (17:27). This implies that man needs a relationship with God that he does not currently enjoy and since *some* will find that relationship, there are *some* that won't.
- G. He establishes God as a personal God rather than a disinterested transcendent deity such as the gods they worshiped - He is not far from each of us (17:27).
- H. He clarifies what sin is and establishes that their idolatry is utterly reprehensible (17:29).
- I. He establishes a philosophy of history that God established and now controls. Time does not go on in unending, ever-repeating cycles. Time is linear - it progresses as God accomplishes His plan for the world. This establishes a future ordained by God that would have to be considered by his hearers (17:31).

Note: What Paul has actually done here can be considered a form of pre-evangelism in that he presents a biblical worldview for his hearers. This biblical worldview becomes the framework in which he sets the gospel message.

IV. The Nonnegotiable Gospel Paul Preached

- A. Paul established the meta-narrative before presenting Jesus.

Postmodernism loves narratives or stories but abhors the idea of a unifying meta-narrative. In order to rightly present Christ to a biblically illiterate society, it is imperative that we not back away from the meta-narrative. The narrative of Christ can only be understood in the framework of the meta-narrative of God's plan for the world.

- B. Paul did not trim the truth claims of the Gospel to make it acceptable to the worldview of his hearers. He affirmed Christ, and he did not back down from the incredible claim of the resurrection.

His affirmation and insistence of the resurrection of Christ from the dead created the offence that cut off the discussion and brought the address to an end. Yet Paul firmly maintained his affirmation and declaration of this offensive point.

In ministering to a Postmodern world we must identify the nonnegotiable elements of the Gospel and refuse to back down from them regardless of the offense created or the apparent loss of opportunity or hearing.

As there was for Paul, there must be for us some irreducible and nonnegotiable content to the Gospel, content that must not be abandoned, no matter how unacceptable it is to some other worldview. It follows that especially when we are trying hard to connect wisely with some worldview other than our own, we must give no less careful attention to the nonnegotiable of the Gospel, lest in our efforts to communicate wisely and with relevance, we unwittingly sacrifice what we mean to communicate.

V. Paul's Example – "The Touch of Truth"

In Acts 17 Paul clearly and carefully constructs a message that will engage his hearers on their terms without compromising the message. A second example of Paul's wise understanding of the audience he was addressing can be seen in his presentation of God's message to Felix in Acts 24. He took advantage of a divine encounter providentially arranged by God.

- A. He started by broaching Moral grounds – "righteousness"

He had to talk to an unrighteous man in an unrighteous culture about righteousness.

- B. He moved from a point of reference (righteousness) to a point of relevance (self-control).

In the arena of righteousness, Felix's particular point of connection was self-control – his lack thereof. In our time, the point of relevance may be love. Felix needed self-control; our world needs love.

- C. He climaxed with a point of disturbance – “judgment”
1. Felix was convicted by the truth.
 2. Felix observed the truth teller – will his conduct match his message? Will he give me a bribe?

Conclusion: (*Three observations*)

1. Our apologetic needs an apologetic that is not merely argued but passionately lived – so passionately lived out that the teller is willing to incur risk. Paul risked a great deal, too, when he, a prisoner, determined to confront Felix, his judge, with the truth about Felix’s life and spiritual need.
2. Our apologetic must be seen as well as heard. Our life and conduct must not detract from the message we are preaching.
3. Our apologetic must be the right message delivered through God-ordained means. It is not enough to just “image” or “picture” the message through our example and our life. The message is fundamentally propositional in nature, so we must use our words to communicate the Word to needy men in all cultural milieus.