

[Book Thesis: The Power of God Spreads the Gospel]

“The Message”

[Lessons on Evangelism, part 1]

Several years ago, area churches distributed copies of the Jesus video door to door. Later they returned to discuss the film with people who'd seen it. Some pastors I knew were deeply frustrated because they couldn't get their members to participate.

Frankly, I'd have been one of those no-shows too because door-to-door efforts worked much better in the days when Americans were more social and community minded. Now they resent interruptions at home. What they most often want, believers fail to offer: relationships. With the toll 21<sup>st</sup> century life takes on relationships, most people want to *know* you before they want to hear a *message* from you.

But those pastors had a hard time recruiting workers partly because evangelism's just hard to do, *period*. Is it on *your* radar screen. Did you share the gospel with *anyone* yet this year? Who can with overflowing daytimers, an anemic spiritual life, fear of not knowing answers, and the possibility of being rejected? And yet Jesus said, “You will be my witnesses.” Not, you might be, or you could be, or it would be a nice idea, “You *will* be my witnesses.” (Acts 1:8) He said to all his followers, “Go everywhere and tell everyone about me.” Few *gifted* evangelists, but all divinely *called* evangelists

Acts 17:16-34, contains one of the 2 most instructive incidents on evangelism in the NT (other ones of Jesus with the woman at the well in John 4). For 3 weeks we're going to invite the Apostle Paul to give us lessons on evangelism from this text. Today, we're going to talk about the message of evangelism, the content; what should we communicate. (Later, the contacts, and the results.)

If we only have 10 minutes to share our faith with someone, what would we cover? READ Acts 17:16-34. PRAY.

**Story**

Athens was a detour for Paul. On the run from persecution in Macedonia, he was probably headed eventually, to Rome. Instead he ended up in this small but influential Greek city to wait for Timothy and Silas to catch up with him. Athens' glory days as an empire and portrait of democracy had been over for nearly 500 years. Yet much of the civilized world was still under the spell of Greek culture Athens exported.

Many of us kill time at a place we don't plan to be very long, by sightseeing. Paul walked around the city and everywhere he went were magnificent buildings..., temples to pagan gods. And perhaps after he'd seen a dozen, something happened to him.

Christian, when you see a mosque, or people bowing before Buddhist priests in the streets, when you read ungodly remarks in the newspaper made by a local pastor, when you see young people having sex at 14 and 16, when you see politicians lying to get votes, when you see a neighbor's marriage fall apart because of pride, are you bothered? Are you bothered by what's on TV, on your computer screen, what comes out of your neighbor's mouth? Does sin stir you the same way it affected Paul?

The NIV says (16) *he was greatly distressed*. Too mild. *παροξυνο* means not just that he was upset, but infuriated. So instead of spending his days touring and resting and

reading and shopping, he began to preach. In the synagogue, in the marketplace, and in the council atop the Acropolis: the Areopagus. 3 places, 3 audiences.

a) [17] The synagogue: Jews & Gentile converts who already knew about the One, True God. Who already were quite familiar with the OT Scriptures. Who already knew the promises of God—including the promise of a Messiah, a Deliverer.

b) [17] The marketplace: perhaps the unemployed, but more likely, the wealthy, and obviously—the educated.

c) [19] The Areopagus: Council composed of thinkers that made decisions on religious and educational matters.

Despite different audiences, the essentials of Paul's message were the same: Jesus and the resurrection, and sin. Let's look at these.

### 1) Jesus' Death & Resurrection

(READ v.18). Always the same (READ 1 Cor.15:3-4.) As of *first* importance. People get opposition sharing their faith and call me with questions, "How do I answer this person's question about the problem of evil?" or "He's saying he doesn't believe the Bible is God's Word. Now what?"

Those questions *may* need answers down the road but they're often delaying tactics to put you on the defensive and distract you from Jesus. What's central in Christianity is Christ. What's central in the gospel message is not the nature of the Bible, not whether the creation account took 6 days or 6 eras, and not heterosexuality, what's central is JESUS. [Rabbit trail: Have you ever noticed how much easier the name "God" rolls off your tongue in conversation, than does the name Jesus? Think about that.]

You haven't talked about the gospel, until you've talked about Jesus. God isn't enough. Because Jesus is the *Reveal* of God. READ John 1:18. Jesus is the linchpin to God, and the linchpin of the gospel. I preached a message in 1989 at my home church's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary: "The Linchpin of Jesus Christ: Time to Change it?" Churches and professing Christians all across this country are converting Jesus from a Redeemer to a Reformer; from a Savior to a saccharine sweet Santa.

But the heart of the gospel is Jesus dying and rising again, for sinners.

### 2) Sin

Which brings us to gospel essential #2: sin. You say, "I didn't see sin mentioned." Look again. READ v.31. Where there's judge, there's wrongdoing, there's sin nearby. A judge's job is to deal firmly with sin. Paul explained (30), in the past, *God overlooked your sin. Paul said the same thing in Rom.3:25-26: God presented him [Jesus] as a sacrifice of atonement through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed before hand unpunished.* What beforehand sins? The ones godly people like Abraham, Moses, Ruth, Jeremiah, King David committed before Christ, before the cross. They went to heaven anyway because Jesus' blood was so holy it paid God even for *their* sin. It was retroactive and applied to godly people who in faith, looked forward to a Redeemer who would do for them what they could not do for themselves: take care of their sin problem.

So, Paul says, the day of failing to punish sin, is over. God has a day scheduled when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed.

Paul's task was probably less complicated than ours is today. Most in the ancient world, believed in sin. Not so today. I was part of a search committee at our local high school a number of years ago when a candidate for a position made the mistake of referring to a student's offense by the word "sin." By the reaction of some you would have thought that he had used a 4-letter vulgarity. Apart from Christians and Muslims and some Jews in our land, the average American cannot swallow the idea that people—at least not themselves—are sinners. Sin is rapidly becoming little more than a biological disorder.

What I said about Jesus earlier, I repeat about sin: you haven't talked about the gospel until you've talked about sin. Look at it this way. No one needs Jesus but sinners so only the person convinced of personal sin is likely to show genuine interest in Jesus.

### **3) The Message: Special emphasis for the particular audience**

Because of who he was talking to in the marketplace and the Areopagus, Paul selected some other, vital points. Both audience were essentially the same: **skeptical** (18 ["babbler" was a bird picking randomly at seed in a barnyard]) **sophisticated** (21 [Fancied themselves very worldly, very up on the latest ideas]), but very **religious** (22). So Paul chose some perfect gems from his witnessing bag just for them.

1. You are ignorant (although done tactfully, 23)
2. God is the Creator (24)
3. God needs no temple, or anything else (24, 25; would have agreed)
4. God is sovereign (26)
5. God is personal (27)
6. God sustains you (28)
7. God is ready to judge all who worship things other than him (29-31)

Extremely bright and well-educated himself, Paul knew exactly what it was his hearers needed to hear. He gave both the essential elements, and those things of particular interest to these particular hearers.

### **Concl:**

Let me wrap up Paul's essentials: Jesus, sin. He died to save sinners, and rose again. That's the gospel: I passed on what I received that is most important: Jesus died, buried, rose on the third day. That's the gospel message. And friends, do you have any idea how desperately America needs it? In fact, do you have any idea how badly the *church* in America needs it?

May 24, NEWSWEEK did a cover story on the "Left Behind" books by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins. In the weeks that followed, readers blitzed the magazine with angry letters. Here's one from a reader in Loma Linda, CA:

*...LaHaye and Jenkins seem to joyfully proclaim coming torture and eternal suffering to those who disagree with them. They make Jesus say, "Death is too good for you. You are sentenced to eternity in the lake of fire." What a libel on the character of Jesus Christ! Are we supposed to love him more knowing about the frightful tortures he is allegedly planning? As a lifelong Christian believer, I could never enjoy eternal life in heaven knowing that the God I worship is guilty of carrying out unspeakable tortures in hell even as I sing praises to him and his*

*life. Only oafs like LaHaye and Jenkins could promulgate such hellish untruths....*

As one oaf to another..., I exhort you to say like Paul, "I am resolved to know nothing but Jesus, and him crucified (1 Cor.2:2).