

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

“The Contacts”

[Lessons on Evangelism, part 2]

Why are you part of the church? Part of *this* church?

- Because your children are safely cared for, or taught in an interesting fashion
- You’re partial to the music
- The sermon is interesting enough to make the 65 minutes bearable
- The people are nice
- It’s close to your house

In honor of the political season, I thought it would be nice if we had our own convention complete with hats, ticker tape, and banners. We could do it right here, right after the Republican Convention only instead of lobbying for one candidate or platform plank, we’d take a stand with other people who want to be part of the church the same reason you want to be part of the church.

In his tough book on the church *The Present Future*, Reggie McNeal says: *The North American Church is suffering from severe mission amnesia. It has forgotten why it exists. The church was created to be the people of God to join him in his redemptive mission to the world. The church was never intended to exist for itself. It was and is the chosen instrument of God to expand his kingdom. The church is the bride of Christ. Its union with him is designed for reproduction, the growth of the kingdom.*

Why does the church matter to us? Because it’s the vehicle for reproduction? Or are we church *consumers*? Are we here for our *own* benefit, or ultimately for His?

Last year in Thailand, I asked a Christian translator, “Who takes responsibility for evangelism in your tribal churches?” The language barrier interfered, but after the fourth try, he explained that the average church member has no sense of obligation to witness for Christ. That’s an “evangelist’s” job. They figured God would raise up *one* evangelist for their church. He *hadn’t* in most of them. I left disheartened about the prospects for future impact. I realized we had simply exported American notions.

Is evangelism the pastor’s job, or the special speaker’s job? No, it’s *ours*. 75-90% of all conversion, come through *your* witness; that of a friend.

Find Acts 17. In this second sermon on evangelism from Paul’s visit to Athens, I want to talk about the **contacts**: the people Paul spoke to. In it may be a lesson for us about who *we* can witness comfortably to. Paul was a church planter and gifted as a public evangelist who often spoke to strangers on the spot. However, most of us who are called but not gifted, will instead do it over a period of time with a friend or acquaintance. Who is it we may be most comfortable with? In this lesson, Paul has 3 tips for us. READ vv.16-34. PRAY.

1. Who would be good for you to reach: Who do you have a passion for?

Paul’s first preaching place in Athens was the synagogue: the Jewish church building where they went for worship and teaching. After the Jewish hostility to Paul at Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13), it’s a wonder he bothered maintaining this practice. The Jews had

nearly run Paul and Barnabas out of town after his preaching. Paul ominously denounced them in v.36: *“We had to speak the word of God to you first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles.”*

Yet, most places Paul went, he kept looking for Jews: by a river, in synagogues. He preached to them in Iconium, in Philippi, in Thessalonica, in Berea, and now in Athens. Although he was called the “Apostle to the Gentiles,” his love for his own people kept him from ever abandoning them fully. He’d been born a Jew. Trained in Judaism’s strictest sect. He’d arrested, imprisoned, and killed people, on behalf of Judaism. Had he remained a follower of the Law, he may have become a renowned rabbi.

Even after his conversion, he bled Jewish blood. READ Rom.9:1-4a. God had opened Paul’s eyes, now Paul craved God to do the same for his people.

Who should you share the gospel with? Who do you have a passion for? A particular ethnic or religious group? Some of you were Catholics when you came to Christ. Do you have a passion for them? Others came from Amish background. Have you stripped yourself of your heritage completely or is there a longing to see more of your people saved? Dave’s been to South America twice and has such a passion for Latinos that he and Kristen plan to live near Lancaster’s Latino population after they get married next month.

Passions are not just interests, they are divinely placed compasses that point us towards people to whom God wants us to speak His love.

2. Who would be good for you to reach: Whom are you like?

When Paul wasn’t preaching to Jews in Athens’ synagogue, he was preaching to skeptical intellectuals in the market place—the Agora. For thousands of years—across cultures—market places and town squares have formed a sort of nexus of citizen information and mobilization. You shop for vegetables, then socialize and solve community and world problems. Thankfully, TV has now delivered us from all that foolish timewasting, but Paul capitalized on it.

REREAD v.21: Apparently this was the citywide pastime. In Athens, it was not unusual for the wealthy and upper middle class to have 10-20 slaves. Perhaps that’s why they were free to discuss philosophy!

Some followed Epicurus, a philosopher from 300 years before. Epicurus dismissed religion as ignorance, claiming any gods that existed were unlikely to bother with humans. Pleasure should be life’s chief objective. Not hedonism—doing whatever *feels* good, but the pleasure of tranquility, a life free of pain or disruptive passions; and a rational life free of superstitious fears like the fear of death.

The Stoics viewed life differently. You know a little about the Stoics because you still call someone who ignores or hides grief or sorrow, a “stoic.” The Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius who dies early in the movie “Gladiator” was a stoic; even wrote a book about it. Zeno was the originator, a philosopher from Cyprus who lived about the same time as Epicurus. He said, “Man is a rational being, unique in all creation.” Because you can think, you can conquer the world by conquering yourself. Through meditation, you become indifferent to both pain and pleasure (new age concepts). And in learning to control emotion and desire, you learn wisdom and how to apply it. These were early humanists.

Paul was never an Epicurean, never a Stoic. But what he had in common with the marketplace crowd that day was his intelligence, his education, and a grasp of literature beyond just the Jewish world. He was influenced by the Greek university in his hometown, sent to Jerusalem—probably at 13—to study under Gamaliel (Acts 22:3), perhaps the greatest rabbi who ever lived. He was a superior student not only in Jewish law, but in the scholarly traditions (Gal.1:14). And he was conversant enough with Gentile culture to quote pagan poets like Epimenides, and Aratus like he did before the Areopagus (v.28). In many ways, Paul was like these people.

Who would be good for you to reach: who are you like?

Who do you know that likes art like you do? Or music? Maybe you're a sports fan and find yourself on HS bleachers surrounded by other sports fans. Who do you know—or will meet next week—who's at the same life stage you are with a couple of babies—or single, or has an empty nest too? Who shares your occupation, career, or collects baseball cards? Commonalities make friendships, acquaintances and conversations enjoyable, and thus, easier. Who are you like?

3. Who would be good for you to reach: What are your opportunities?

Paul's debut in the marketplace intrigued the local debaters enough that they extended an official invitation to him to speak before the Areopagus. The Areopagus was both a place and a group of people. The *place* was on the rock top of Mars Hill, a tribute to the god of war. It's not there today although the steps carved into rock that led to it, remain.

It was also a civic council, one that dealt with matters of religion and education within the city. Their interest in Paul was both philosophical and legal: they *were* curious about his teachings, but they also had an obligation to protect their people from nutcases.

Paul welcomed their invitation: I'll gladly talk to your council. He was always looking to get his foot in a door—any door. You know what drove Paul? The knowledge that the message of the cross offered hope. The message of Judaism offered *religious* despair: *Once I was alive apart from law; but when the commandment came, sin sprang to life and I died.* [Rom7:9] And the message of Gentile religions offered *demonic* despair. In 1 Cor. 10:20 Paul observed, *...the sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons...* So, Paul capitalized on *every* opportunity he had.

What are your opportunities? It's not likely you or I will be asked to address the city council or the Senate. But what of that opportunity to talk privately to a school teacher? Or address your civic club? Or you sit on an airplane with someone who clearly wants to talk? What are your opportunities?

Concl:

Whom should you reach? *Someone.* Because someone reached you. It may have been your parents, a girlfriend, a cousin, a small group leader, a pastor, but someone reached you. Will you in turn reach someone else? In the Bible, just before the Messiah comes, Elijah gets the way ready by calling out: prepare the way of the Lord. We are His laborers, He has no one else. Live for him before them, and speak for Him.