

FAITH

You gotta have faith! 4. Evangelism and Faith

Steve Wilcox

You gotta have faith! 4. A look at evangelism and faith

The Lord Jesus Christ told us to make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:19). But how are we to do that in our nation, which seems so closed to the message of the Bible?

It is a question which every pastor and gospel-centred Christian is rightly asking. And many answers have been given.

"We must keep preaching God's Word in season and out of season."

"Only God can do it – we need a movement of God's Spirit."

"Believers will be added in ones and twos."

I would wholeheartedly agree with each of these suggestions. And people are coming to faith – witness the fruit from the *A Passion for Life* initiative recently. And yet I can't help feeling that many of us (myself included) are entering the spiritual battle short of confidence and expecting to lose.

This should not be, for two reasons. First, we have a God who *"sits enthroned above the circle of the earth"* (Isaiah 40:22). We have a God who *"gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were"* (Romans 4:17). A God who is *"able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine"* (Ephesians 3:20). With such a God we should be entering every spiritual battle expecting to win (whether victory comes through death, mass conversions, or something in between – see Hebrews 11:33-38). We should expect a *"victory of*

God's Word over all the world."[1]

Second, we are on the side of truth. In previous articles we have been reminded that everyone has faith. That all truth is God's truth. That there is no such thing as 'objectivity', but only life-giving ideas and misery-bringing ideas – for this life and the life to come. If these claims are true, then Christians have all the more reason to go on the offensive in the spiritual battle. Indeed – as we shall see – in evangelism, (gracious) attack is one of the best forms of defence.

Everyone has a worldview

Our starting point is to recognise that everyone has a worldview. The concept of 'worldview' is becoming increasingly familiar thanks to organisations such as UCCF.[2] A person's worldview is the mix of beliefs (or faith commitments) which forms their understanding of the world and how they fit into it.[3] These beliefs are not just formed through rational thought; more often than not they are formed through a person's experience of life. It follows that a person's worldview can change over time.

Take the development of my own worldview as an example. From birth I believed that God exists. My parents read Bible stories to me, and taught me basic moral values. Importantly, I grew up attending church. Even though the church was not evangelical, I am grateful for the experience: I grew up to fear God, to be concerned about what he thought of me, and to be conditioned to attending church on a Sunday morning. God was relevant to me from the start – I was a 'God-fearer'.

During my teenage years I became more aware of my sinfulness, and began to question whether God would accept me. Unknown to me, the Holy Spirit was at work in me. At the same time, I remained committed to beliefs that I shared with most of my contemporaries. I believed that possessions and relationships, among other things, are to be pursued and can deliver what they promise. My worldview was unstable, and moving towards a point of crisis.

The crisis came during my Gap Year in Uganda. I encountered people with an obvious personal friendship with God – which I clearly didn't share. I spent some time looking at the evidence for the

resurrection. I concluded it was more likely than not that it happened, and that it would be a huge leap of faith to continue to live as though it hadn't occurred. Soon after (at university), the gospel was finally explained to me. God was a personal God, I had rebelled against him personally. Jesus had died in my place, if I asked his forgiveness. I needed to respond – and I was ready to repent and believe. My worldview had changed fundamentally. Of course, ongoing adjustment has been necessary – particularly as I have learned that the idols in which I was formerly trusting cannot satisfy (Psalm 16.4, Jeremiah 2.13) and that Jesus alone is worthy and qualified to be my Lord and Treasure as well as Saviour (see Hebrews 1.1-3 for some of his qualifications!). 2 Corinthians 3.18 tells me that my worldview will continue to change incrementally for the rest of my earthly life.

Lessons

What biblical lessons can be drawn concerning worldview from my experiences and those of countless others? First, parental influence is vital (Proverbs 22.6, Ephesians 6.4). Second, because of our natural suppression of the truth (Romans 1.18 – see part 2), the work of the Holy Spirit is vital (Ephesians 1.17-19, 1 Corinthians 2.10-16). Third, worldviews contain inconsistencies – beliefs which conflict with each other. For some people those inconsistencies will remain throughout life; for others their worldview will be brought to a point of crisis, and will change to reflect the new evidence. Of course, such a crisis can move a person away from God. But it can also bring them to God, if they have been influenced by the Spirit (2 Corinthians 4.3-6). Fourth, relationships have a key role in evangelism (see John 1.29-51 for a biblical example). A person will often respect a Christian, and observe a desirable character, before progressing. Finally, God's Word (empowered by the Spirit) is essential and sufficient in bringing a person to Christ; but God's Word doesn't work in a vacuum. It is compelling to people precisely when they realise that their worldview has broken down – that there is a crisis which can only be resolved by accepting the testimony of Scripture. Jesus's encounter with the woman at the well provides a good example of this (John 4.1-26, 29).

Questioning evangelism

So, what lessons can we draw for evangelism? Most importantly, that we should be prepared to question the beliefs and assumptions of those we are engaging with – to graciously go on the offensive.

In his important book *Questioning Evangelism*, [4] Randy Newman distinguishes between three approaches – three basic types of weapon in a Christian's evangelistic armoury. The first approach – **“declaring the gospel”** – is the ability to explain the gospel clearly. This is where resources such as *Two Ways to Live* are so helpful. He calls the second approach **“defending the gospel”**. By this he means responding to common questions about Christianity. Both of these approaches are important and have their place. Our current concern is with his third approach – **“dialoguing the gospel”**. This is the skill of *“giving and taking – asking questions and bouncing ideas back and forth”* (p.15). In short, Newman suggests that we ask questions of the person with whom we are speaking, and challenge their false ideas. For example, *“in many cases people have been lulled into believing the illogical, and rousing them from sleep must happen before we present any gospel content”* (p.57).

Matching up

How does this fit with the idea of worldview? The person with whom we are speaking holds beliefs as strongly as we do. Some hold them on the basis of strong evidence; some on the basis of hearsay; some on the basis of not very much at all. And they should be helped to consider whether their own cherished beliefs are valid, just as much as asking us to defend our own. So, for example, it is right on the one hand that we defend the historicity of the Gospels. But it is equally right that the other person should defend why they have doubts about the Gospels; and how they can justify their understanding of the world. It may be that, in the course of discussion, and by the prompting of the Spirit, they spot a chink in their own worldview: a chink which somewhere down the line may develop into a full blown crisis of (non-Christian) faith.

It is beyond the scope of this article to give examples of questions you might ask. Newman's

book would be a good place to start if you wanted to take things further.

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Re-evangelising the UK

I believe this is an exciting time to be an evangelical Christian in this country. It is true that in some ways we are being squeezed by a hostile culture. In his providence God is allowing our faithfulness to him to be tested.

But, if we are prepared to go on the offensive in his strength, the possibilities are immense. We are surrounded by people searching for answers; disillusioned with government; questioning whether there's more to life than possessions and entertainment; depressed by the wasteland of secularist thinking. True, the churches are often viewed as part of the problem rather than the solution.

Our challenge is to lovingly expose the emptiness of other worldviews; and to proclaim the gospel as the only truthful, joy-inducing alternative there is or ever will be. We need to do this in our preaching, as we allow Scripture to reveal the emptiness of idols of thought and heart. We need to do it in personal conversation. Of course, there will always be opposition – the message of the cross is and will always be foolishness to those who are perishing (1 Corinthians 1.18). But may it be the gospel that offends people, not the apparent 'blind faith' of some Christians. For, as we have seen over the past four months, everyone has faith – and in the final analysis only Christian faith is reasonable.

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Footnotes

[1] *The Pleasures of God* by John Piper (Christian Focus, 2002), p.223.

[2] See <http://www.bethinking.org>.

[3] See *Hidden Worldviews* by Steve Wilkens & Mark Sanford (IVP Academic, 2009) for a helpful introduction.

[4] Published by Kregel, 2004.

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