

How Are We to Spread the Gospel?

Pastors are deluged by advertisements and urgings to use a particular system or approach to spreading the gospel. They receive mailings encouraging them to purchase this or that training system. Their church members urge them that if the church would simply begin using the latest fad in evangelism then they would finally see God's blessing on their evangelistic work. Pastors are often left asking themselves what they are doing wrong or where to begin. Let me suggest that we have too often thought the Scriptures commanded us to evangelize, but did not give us any guidance about how to evangelize. However, the Bible does set forth examples and patterns of evangelism.

I. The Biblical Pattern of Evangelism

I am assuming that evangelism is for this age. I will not take the time and space now to defend that concept.¹ Great Commission passages in the Gospels clearly spell out the need for spreading the gospel. The problem is that even when there is an agreement that the gospel must be preached today, there are still a host of issues regarding what evangelism actually is, and how it was done in the New Testament.

A. The Biblical Definition of Evangelism

Biblically our word *evangelism* comes from the New Testament word εὐαγγελίζω. Strictly speaking the word refers to proclaiming some kind of good news.² The New Testament authors use it primarily to refer to declaring *the* Good News, the gospel.³ Notice this is important. They do not use the word to mean causing a conversion. They use it of the proclamation of the Gospel. Clearly proclaiming the Good News, whether from a pulpit or person to person, is evangelism. The number of professions of faith is not determinative of evangelism; giving the gospel is. The New Testament also uses other words to describe evangelism. These are words like *preach* (κηρύσσω) and *witness* (μαρτυρέω). They emphasize the action of preaching or telling others about Christ.

¹ For a good discussion of the Great Commission being for today see: Jerram Barrs, *The Heart of Evangelism* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001), pp. 23–33.

² The Koine Greek used the word εὐαγγελίζω to proclaim news like marriages, births, and military victories. See J. H. Moulton and G. Milligan, *Vocabulary of the Greek Testament*, reprint of 1930 edition (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997), p. 259.

³ S. v. “εὐαγγελίζω,” BDAG.

B. The Biblical Pattern of Evangelism

There is a discernable biblical pattern of evangelism in the New Testament. A brief survey of evangelism in Acts will suffice to demonstrate the core of the Gospel and how the Apostles presented it. Regardless of whether the Luke recorded the complete sermons or whether he summarized them, Luke recorded exactly the message he wanted to communicate about the gospel and its preaching.

1. Peter's Sermon on Pentecost (Acts 2:14–41)

Notice the Theological Truths Peter Presents in Acts 2.

- a. Peter Quotes Old Testament Prophecy.
- b. Peter Makes Reference to the Eschaton.
- c. Peter Draws Attention to the Work of the Holy Spirit.
- d. Peter Declares Jesus of Nazareth to Be the Christ.
- e. Peter Declares That Jesus Has Risen from the Dead.
- f. Peter Calls on His Hearers to Repent.

2. Peter's Sermon in Solomon's Portico (Acts 3:11–26)

- a. Peter Directs the Glory to God.
- b. Peter Declares Jesus Is God's Servant (probably a reference to Isaiah 42, 52–53).
- c. Peter Boldly Tells His Listeners Their Sin of Rejecting Jesus, the Holy and Righteous One.
- d. Peter Calls Jesus the Author of Life (God).
- e. Peter Declares that God Raised Jesus from the Dead.
- f. Peter Explains That Jesus' Death Was to Fulfill Prophecy.
- g. Peter Explains That Jesus Was the Fulfillment of Many Prophecies.
- h. Peter Calls on the Jews to Repent.

3. Peter's Defense Before the Sanhedrin (Acts 4:8–12)

- a. Peter Gives the Glory to Jesus Christ.
- b. Peter Equates Jesus with Old Testament Promises of the Messiah.
- c. Peter Declares the Exclusivity of Salvation Through Jesus Christ—Implying the Need to Believe on Jesus.

4. Stephen's Sermon Before His Martyrdom (Acts 7:2–53)

- a. Stephen Relies Heavily on the Old Testament Narrative of God's Work.
- b. Stephen Quotes Old Testament Scripture to Demonstrated God's Judgment.
- c. Stephen Quotes Old Testament Scripture to Explain the Nature of God.
- d. Stephen Boldly Condemned the Sinfulness of His Hearers.
- e. Stephen's Sermon Implies a Necessity of Repentance.

5. Philip's Person-to-Person Witness to the Ethiopian (Acts 8:26–39)
 - a. Philip Notices the Ethiopian's Situation; He Is Reading Scripture.
 - b. Philip Offers to Explain the Scripture.
 - c. Philip Declares That Jesus Is the Fulfillment of Isaiah 53:7–8.
 - d. Philip Encourages the Ethiopian to Respond in Faith to the Gospel.

6. Peter's Message to Cornelius's Household (Acts 10:34–43)
 - a. Peter Declares That God Wants to Save All People Groups.
 - b. Peter Declares That the Gospel Brings Peace Through Jesus Christ Who Is Lord of All.
 - c. Peter Draws Attention to the Ministry of Christ.
 - d. Peter Proclaims the Death of Christ.
 - e. Peter Declares the Resurrection of Christ.
 - f. Peter Explains Christ's Command to Spread the Good News.
 - g. Peter Declares That God Appointed Christ to Judge All People.
 - h. Peter Preaches That Faith in Christ Brings Forgiveness of Sins Through the Name of Jesus.

7. Paul's Sermon in Pisidian Antioch (Jewish and Proselyte Audience) (Acts 13:16–43)
 - a. Paul Reminds His Hearers of God's Grace to Israel.
 - b. Paul Points to the Messianic Promises in the Davidic Covenant.
 - c. Paul Declares Jesus to Be David's Son, the Savior.
 - d. Paul Proclaims That the Leadership of Israel Rejected the Messiah and Had Him Killed.
 - e. Paul Declares That God Raised Jesus from the Dead.
 - f. Paul Proclaims That Many Witnessed The Resurrected Christ.
 - g. Paul Contends That Jesus Fulfilled Old Testament Prophecies Regarding His Deity, Role as Messiah, and Resurrection.
 - h. Paul Preaches that Forgiveness of Sins Is Available to All Who Believe in Jesus.
 - i. Paul Warns His Listeners Not to Scoff at God's Salvation in Christ.

8. Paul's Sermon at the Areopagus (Acts 17:22–34)
 - a. Paul Points Out the False Worship of the Athenians.
 - b. Paul Declares That The Athenians Have Missed Worshipping the One, Living and True, Creator God.
 - c. Paul Corrects the Misconception That God Needs Humanity.
 - d. Paul Declares the Sovereign Control of God Over the Nations.
 - e. Paul Quotes Greek Poets to Draw Attention to the True Nature of God.
 - f. Paul Condemns Idolatry and Its False Teaching About the Nature of God.
 - g. Paul Calls on the Athenians to Repent in Light of God's Coming Judgment of All Men.
 - h. Paul Declares the Resurrection of Jesus.

9. Paul's Sermon Before Agrippa and Bernice (Acts 26:1–29)
 - a. Paul Explains How He Followed Phariseeism Zealously.
 - b. Paul Declares How Christ Appeared to Him and He Was Converted.
 - c. Paul Declares That He Was Called to Preach Christ and to See People Repent and Be Delivered from the Power of Satan to God.
 - d. Paul Declares That Forgiveness of Sins Is Available to Those Who Are Sanctified by Faith in Christ.
 - e. Paul Explains That He Obeyed and Went Preaching the Gospel.
 - f. Paul Declares That He Was Not Crazy, But That the Facts About Jesus Christ Were Publicly Known.
 - g. Paul Appeals to Agrippa's Knowledge of the Old Testament.
 - h. Paul Declares That He Wants All Who Hear Him to Believe in Christ.

C. Some Conclusions from the New Testament Pattern of Evangelism
 If one examines the pattern of these sermons and gospel presentations in Acts, a clear pattern emerges. Let me draw several conclusions from the biblical pattern in Luke's account of sermons and gospel presentations in Acts.

1. Jesus' Person, Cross work, and Resurrection Are Central to All of the Gospel Presentations in Acts.
 Human needs, argumentation, and personal opinion do not make up large portions of these sermons. The mass of material in these sermons is made up of proclaiming who Jesus is and what he accomplished by his death and resurrection.

2. Repentance and/or Faith Appear in Every One of the Gospel Presentations in Acts.
Every one of these sermons makes either a specific call for a response to the gospel message or they imply it so strongly that it cannot be overlooked. Notably most of the sermons use either the word *repents* or the word *believe*. Most do not use both. This is because the New Testament never separates these two concepts. Saving faith is a repentant faith and Spirit worked repentance is always a believing repentance. Faith and repentance are inseparable and can therefore stand in for each other in gospel presentations.
3. The Apostles Varied Their Starting Point of the Gospel According to The Situation of Their Hearers.
The Gospel never changes in the Apostolic Presentations in Acts. In each of the gospel presentations in the Acts the same core truths about Christ and His work are presented. The variance in each of the presentations deals with the situation of the hearers. If the hearers were Jews or Proselytes the Apostles emphasized the Old Testament Prophecies about Christ. If the hearers were gentiles, the Apostles began with creation. Even in the case of different Jewish and proselyte audiences there is a discernable difference due to the circumstances. Phillip uses Isaiah 53 to proclaim Christ because it was what the Ethiopian was reading. On other occasions the Apostles used other Old Testament Scriptures. There is no discernable “Romans Road” in the apostolic declaration of the Gospel. Considering this apostolic pattern in the Acts, it would be wise for us to think a bit about the understanding of Jesus in twenty-first century America.

II. The Influence of Postmodernism on American Culture

American Culture has changed drastically in the last 100 years. It is not just the shift of the 1960s that is evident in American Culture. The information revolution of the first part of the twenty-first century has greatly changed American Culture. The major shifts in American Culture are ultimately due to the influence of what many call Postmodernism⁴ and the rapid advance of communication technology.

⁴ For further understanding regarding Post-modernism the following works should prove helpful. The book that began the conversation about Post-modernism for many people is Alan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987). Bloom’s book is widely misunderstood. As a professor of classics he did decry the abandonment of absolutes, however, Bloom’s conclusions are not Christian they are a call to return to Enlightenment Modernism. For a political and secular look at Post-modernism consider Lynne V. Cheney, *Telling the*

A. Postmodernism and Philosophy

Postmodernism is the ultimate conclusion of Enlightenment Modernism. The skepticism of Hume, the Nihilism of Nietzsche, and the Existential of Sartre all come from Modernistic thought, but ultimately conclude with a postmodern denial of absolutes. A couple of French philosophers in the Twentieth Century are often most identified as advocates of Postmodernism, Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida. Ultimately, the essence of Postmodernism is a questioning, not only of the absolutes of the Bible, but of knowledge, of communication, and of certainty about anything. Philosophically Postmodernism is just another school of thought, however it is the spirit of Postmodernism that has come to have a large impact on Western Culture.

B. Postmodernism and Culture

The average American does not even think about philosophical Postmodernism. The names of philosophers and their written works are completely unfamiliar. It is the spirit of Postmodernism, often called pluralism, that supports modern concepts like multiculturalism, and the mislabeled modern virtue of tolerance. Postmodernism has been widely accepted as a spirit of the age, although it is unfamiliar philosophically to most. Politically correct speech and tolerance flow from a fear to offend anyone with the “arrogance” that one may actually know better than someone else. It is evidenced by the repeated use of “I feel” rather than “I know” in modern America. This spirit of Postmodernism has so saturated American culture that it has radically changed the culture (specifically in regard to worldview and morality). For example in 1950 a mother would have been very concerned that her daughter keeps her self morally pure. Her behavior toward young men was considered a moral issue. However, that same mother would have prepared red meat for supper, cooked with butter and lard, and made cakes and pies loaded with saturated fats for her family. In 2010 many mothers do not care about the sexual behavior of their daughters, as long as their daughters avoid disease and pregnancy. In contrast, cooking with butter is nearly

Truth (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995). An excellent book, from an evangelical perspective, considering the perils of relativism and Post-modernism is Donald A. Carson, *The Gagging of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996). For a basic and excellent introduction to the concepts of Modernism and Post-modernism read Kevin Bauder’s articles on the imagination. Especially read Kevin Bauder, “The Importance of Imagination, Part 4: Postmodernity and the Demonic Imagination,” <http://www.centraleseminary.edu/resources/nick-of-time/193-the-importance-of-imagination-part-4>, April 2, 2010.

child abuse to many. There has been a complete reversal in morals. This is due to the culture-shift that is part of the spirit of Postmodernism.

C. Postmodernism and the Gospel

The spirit of Postmodernism is opposed to the categorical and exclusive claims of the gospel. Declaring that the triune God of the Bible is the only true God is very offensive to the spirit of our age. In Modernism Christianity was ridiculed for being ignorant and incorrect, in our age Christianity is just one of many options, but it is offensive if declared to be the exclusive truth about God and salvation. Postmodernism opens opportunities because people will listen to what one believes out of respect for all opinions. However, it also creates walls because of the offense of the exclusivity of Christ.

III. The Various Approaches to Evangelism

Three major factors dictate an analysis of approaches to evangelism. First, is the centrality of Christ and his atoning work in the biblical examples in the book of Acts. Second, is the task of calling for the correct response of repentant faith from those who hear the gospel. Third, is consideration of the spiritual understanding of the hearers of the gospel. These three elements must always be used to evaluate approaches and methods of evangelism. Ignoring these factors leads to a confusing approach to evangelism at the least and possibly unbiblical presentations of the gospel at the worst. It is important to consider the biblical factors. They help us to escape the common debate in evangelism regarding confrontation and relationships. We tend to slide to one side or the other and declare that only one has the right approach to evangelism. The fact is when the biblical emphases are applied both approaches stand out. That means both are part of obedience and both can be used as an excuse for disobedience.

A. Confrontational Evangelism

This could also be called cold-call evangelism. This is any type of evangelism that approaches those with whom the evangelist has not yet built a relationship. Examples of this are door-to-door work, street witnessing, and tract distribution. There are examples of this in the New Testament (Acts 8). As we apply the pattern of Acts to this approach we can see several pitfalls. Not that the approach itself is wrong, but the way it is practiced often diverges from the biblical pattern. First, it is common for this approach not to center on Christ, but on some rehearsed sales-type approach that is “guaranteed” to make converts. Second, it is common to skip over a biblical response to the gospel and push for a decision. Third, it is easy to misunderstand the hearer’s spiritual understanding and therefore start at an unhelpful place. This is especially the case if one is

following a set training pattern that has a cookie cutter approach to evangelism.

B. Mass Evangelism

Mass evangelism is the gathering of large crowds in order to proclaim the gospel to large numbers of people simultaneously. Examples of this are citywide crusades, local church evangelistic meetings, vacation Bible schools, and similar outreaches. Examples of this in Scripture include Pentecost (Acts 2) and Paul's Sermon in Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13). Like any form of evangelism this can be abused. It is not uncommon for this type of evangelism to devolve into a numbers game. Many preachers use techniques to manipulate the audience psychologically rather than centering on Christ. Second, in order to get decisions many preachers refuse to call for a biblical response of repentant faith, but simply call for a rote recitation of some set prayer. Third, this is one of the most difficult approaches to evangelism to know the hearer's understanding of the biblical message.

C. Person-to-Person Evangelism

This is evangelism done by giving the gospel to those with whom we have a relationship of some kind (relative, friend, neighbor, business associate, etc.). Sometimes those relationships are even built in order to get opportunities to evangelize. Biblical examples include Peter's message to Cornelius's household (Acts 10). First, Christ and his work must be central. This can get off track by falling into the trap of fearing to give the gospel because it might damage the relationship. Second, like all forms of evangelism, a biblical response must be called for, not a simple nod to Jesus. Third, this form does help to know where to begin with the gospel. Building a relationship gives us more information about the person's understanding of biblical truth.

D. Community Work Evangelism

This is increasingly popular as of late. This type of evangelism goes into the community to do service projects with the hope of finding openings for the gospel. I cannot come up with a biblical example that fits this category. This approach is very susceptible to ignoring the person and work of Christ. It too often devolves into service projects with no gospel at all. It runs the danger of confusing community service with evangelism. Second, since gospel opportunities do not present themselves in every case, there is often no call for repentant faith. Third there is little opportunity to grasp the understanding of one's hearers and therefore the gospel is often not given skillfully.

E. Bait and Switch Evangelism

This is a type of evangelism that draws people in with the promise of something other than the gospel and then preaches the gospel to them (this includes free giveaways, many youth rallies, and even some adult outreaches that revolve around some interest or another). I cannot think of a biblical example of this kind of evangelism. First, these do not adorn the gospel of Christ well because they often manipulate people. Second, these kinds of outreach often do not call for a biblical response. It does not mean they cannot, but often they do not. Third, the program often takes over in these approaches and the understanding of the hearers is often not considered.

Conclusion: As pastors we should take heart that we have not been left without a biblical pattern of evangelism. The New Testament consistently presents the faithful telling of Christ and him crucified as the core of the Gospel. In our Postmodern culture that does not change. However, we also should recognize that we need to be wise when telling people the Good News. We need to understand their misunderstandings about God and begin there in order to accurately explain who Jesus is and what he has done. This approach frees us from chasing the fads and gimmicks and allows us the freedom to pursue evangelism.