

Effective Evangelism: JAE384

TAKING JESUS TO WORK

by Bob Perry

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I was challenged to seriously consider the Christian message by a guy whose zeal for defending his convictions obliged me not only to reflect on his point of view but also to ask myself some serious questions about my own. He was someone who had taken the time to ponder the answers to life's most serious questions. He was compelling, courteous, and confident. He didn't knock on my front door, or hand me a pamphlet, or accost me on the street. He didn't offer to wash my car. He didn't invite me to go anywhere with him or encourage me to make a decision about what he had just told me. He just asked me questions that made me think.

Our memorable encounter occurred at 3:00 a.m., amid the hum of electronics and the muted glow of an array of cathode ray displays. I was in the cockpit of a commercial airliner at 35,000 feet over the plains of Kansas—ironically in a position that allowed us both to see the “ends of the earth.” We were at work.

He was an atheist.

I had called myself a Christian all my life.

Our discussion that night illuminates two important considerations about how to talk about our convictions *effectively* in the contemporary culture. First, we have to dispense with the notion that evangelism is an isolated project to be performed by those who are properly trained. I was an utter failure as a Christian evangelist that night because I saw evangelism as a project meant for evangelists. I was “just” a lay believer and therefore utterly unprepared either to articulate or defend my faith. I had certainly never considered that I might be called to do either of those things for someone else at

work. At the time, I considered evangelism to be something to go out and do, not a seamlessly integrated aspect of what it means to be a disciple of Christ.

Second, my interlocutor was a truth seeker whose intent was to destroy my trust in the message of Christianity by challenging me to assess it against reality itself. Looking back through the apologetic lens that I later acquired as a result of our encounter, his challenge could not have been more lethal in exposing the failings of his atheistic point of view or in buttressing my own Christian convictions. I just didn't know it at the time.

The fact that a thoughtful atheist unwittingly succeeded in solidifying my confidence in the gospel demonstrates that our witness today is not confined to the dwindling few who have never heard it. I had heard the gospel message all my life but was compelled to take it seriously for the first time when I was challenged to actually think about it instead of simply regurgitating it. Conversely, my atheist fellow pilot had heard and *rejected* the gospel message—and I was completely unprepared to offer him any reason to reconsider.

False Distinctions. No passage of Scripture gets quoted more than the Great Commission (Matt. 28:19) to exhort the church toward its mission to “go out and evangelize!” It seems that many of us have become content equating “going” with evangelism. But the endgame of the directive we are given here is to “make disciples,” with *go*, *baptize*, and *teach* acting as aorist participles that modify the ongoing imperative verb, *make*.¹ In other words, it would be more accurate to understand evangelism not as a mission in itself, but a project we undertake *as we are going* about living our lives. This simple shift in understanding turns witnessing from a compartmentalized task on a checklist into an integral part of what it means to be a follower of Christ.

We undermine our own efforts in this project when we accept the worldly bifurcation of the sacred from the secular by inadvertently incorporating the Enlightenment assumption of a split view of reality into the church. As a result, we label our fellow Christians ministry leaders, missionaries, or evangelists based on where they earn their paycheck. They are the professionals of the sacred who labor in “full-time ministry;” we are the part-time, layperson help.

Accepting this false distinction ought to send shivers down the spine of anyone who takes his Christian convictions seriously. If the Great Commission tells us anything, it tells us that the mission to make disciples doesn't rely on ministry “professionals.” The very notion of a distinction between secular work and “full-time ministry” would have been incoherent to the original apostles (“sent out ones”), especially Paul, a tentmaker whose greatest recorded evangelistic success began in the

Athenian *agora*, a sprawling marketplace for worldly goods, that he infiltrated with the power of Christian ideas.

The truth is that if you call yourself a Christian, you are, by default, engaged in full-time ministry, and one aspect of that identity entails a commitment to share the good news—to incorporate the title of evangelist into our full-time job descriptions no matter where we work. The discussion I had with my atheist fellow pilot that night was not a planned engagement in “witnessing in the workplace.” It was a turn in the flow of an engaging conversation for which I was woefully unprepared.

Passive Promotion. Integrating our witness into a holistic view of discipleship is not an easy task, but it begins with never using the word “witness,” or any other form of “Christianese” talk, with those who are unfamiliar with its meaning. We need to stop talking oddly and start thinking deeply. Always being prepared to give an answer to anyone who wants to know the reason for the hope that we have requires study and contemplation. That’s why I had never done it. But beyond the need for preparation, our witness also requires a new mindset—one that acknowledges the Holy Spirit’s central role in moving non-believers to active faith, but also recognizes the futility of relying on the direct methods evangelists have traditionally used to challenge them. The realities of the contemporary world don’t change what evangelism is; they do change how we approach it.

Proclaiming the good news through declarative statements and the call to repent can be counterproductive in a world that is becoming increasingly more hostile to the open expression of an exclusive religion such as Christianity. It angers some, evokes negative stereotypes, and may even be grounds for discipline in the sensitive and politically correct work environs we share. But beyond those realities, practical wisdom should temper our willingness to employ that form of witnessing because it has become completely ineffective. The declarative statements I made to my atheist coworker that night about the truth of Christianity fell on deaf ears. His counters—which were all in the form of questions—stopped me in my tracks.

Questions are a disarming but potent way of awakening an apathetic listener or exposing the weakness in an antagonistic stance toward Christianity. Most of our non-Christian contemporaries live in the same boat I occupied that night. They are incapable of defending their stated point of view beyond a few

slogans they’ve heard from others. Asking questions forces them to defend their position and is also a powerful way to illuminate the real emotional or psychological barriers that may be lurking behind an aggressive facade.

On a parallel front, we need to forgo the urge that traditional evangelism has inspired in us to “close the deal.” Instead, we would do well to recognize that our mission is simply to encourage our colleagues to consider the next appropriate step for them toward active trust in the gospel. It’s “little baseball” —the same kind of winning approach a savvy batter employs when he declines to swing for the fence and instead bunts a runner into scoring position.² This kind of mindset requires that we have already established a mutually respectful relationship with them, that we listen first, and that we are able to discern the obstacles they perceive in front of them. We need to be offering gospel-based solutions to the questions they are actually asking, not pontificating about what we think they need to hear.

Total Truth. These challenges to effective evangelism reflect the realities of the world in which we live—a world that is descending rapidly into a post-Christian morass. The earliest evangelists interacted with people who believed in the supernatural, who were all conscious of divine judgment, and who believed that the world had once been better than it now is. In 1946, C. S. Lewis observed that those whom we aim to evangelize share none of these predispositions.³ Today the situation is more pronounced. Many believe that only progress can make a better world and that the problems we have now can be rightfully attributed to religion in general, or Christianity in particular. That is the bad news. The good news is that the gospel reflects ultimate reality and promises a different ending. Where the postmodern skeptic gravitates toward story, we can tell our own, comfortable that it fits within the Grand Story of human history and the obvious human longing for redemption that only a divine Savior can offer. Where the hyper-modernist is steeped in a scientific demand for explanations, we can be confident that Christianity reflects and explains the tangible world in which we find ourselves. There is no subject area we need avoid, no question we dare not ask. The beauty of Christianity resides in the fact that it can stand up to scrutiny from any direction. There is no compartment in which we need to keep our faith in order to protect it from various hostile influences.

The message of the gospel is so comprehensive it can fight its way out of the arguments of an atheist and into the heart of someone who already claims to know it but has substituted his own pride and vanity for confidence in Christ. It can challenge cultural assumptions, answer questions no other worldview can answer, and it reaches to the end of the Earth—a place all of us should be able to see from our office window.

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NOTES

- 1 Biblia.com: *Bible Study Online*, note 27, at: <https://biblia.com/bible/gs-netbible/Mt28.19-20>.
- 2 J. Warner Wallace, "How Do I Share What I Believe? When Evangelism Is Like Baseball," available at: <http://coldcasechristianity.com/2014/how-do-i-share-what-i-believe-whenevangelism-is-like-baseball/>.
- 3 C. S. Lewis, "Modern Man and His Categories of Thought," *Present Concerns* (London: Fount Paperbacks, 1986), 61.