

Effective Evangelism: JAE404

THAT “NONES” MAY NOT PERISH

by Bob Perry

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The church is facing ominous times. Science, culture, and politics are conspiring to silence the gospel and render God’s bride impotent. You can see it in the numbers: less than one half of 1 percent of eighteen- to twenty-three-year-olds hold to a Christian view of the world.¹ More than 80 percent of young adults are spiritually “disengaged” by age twenty-nine.² In society as a whole, the number of those who profess *no belief in God* (the “nones”) more than doubled between 2007 and 2014.³ Though statistics show an overall worldwide increase in the numbers of religious believers, that phenomenon is almost solely attributable to growing numbers in places such as Africa and China. In Europe and America, the numbers of the faithful are declining as younger “nones” replace their more religiously affiliated elders.⁴

Let’s admit it, we live in a dire, post-Christian climate where an archaic call to faith seems to be getting drowned out by a bugle sounding the church’s retreat to isolation. In such an environment, it seems improbable that we might heed the hope-filled exhortation of an evangelist reminding us that God communicates “the mystery of eternal life...through the epochs of a people’s history, as through the successive stages of a man’s life...to raise them from the temporal and the visible to an apprehension of the eternal and invisible.”⁵

If you’ve been tempted to accept the popular view of ecclesiastical catastrophism, know that Augustine wrote those words in AD 426 during a time when the Roman Empire was crumbling, societal ills were being blamed on the church, and Augustine offered good evidence that church clergy, in their collaborative efforts to gain the good graces of the state, actually had been complicit in the *active persecution* of their fellow Christians.⁶

So much for rationalizing present-day evangelistic pessimism in the face of a hostile world.

Story Time. Yes, evangelism is an uphill battle, but if the contemporary church shows a lack of success at reaching the “nones,” it is in some measure due to the fact that we tacitly have accepted modernity’s severed vision of reality. We have separated our intellect from our faith. As a result, too many pew-sitting Christians glide through life

on the wings of a detached anti-intellectualism, while too many apologists have become content with presenting a cerebral body of information in defense of a passionless faith. Our evangelism will remain ineffective so long as we do not succeed in reconnecting our thinking to our living — our apologetics to our discipleship.

While we have been busy refining our arguments in the face of the latest “new atheist” tome, those whom we hope to convince are updating their Facebook status or checking their favorite celebrity’s latest tweet.

We can counter someone with multipoint responses to their objections. We can use flawless logic. We can be charming and winsome and kind. But when it comes right down to it, many whom we aim to engage in the marketplace of ideas have not even come there to shop. For them, it is not a question of “not caring how much we know until they know how much we care.” The truth be told, they couldn’t care less.

We live in an era when the very idea of presenting a challenging line of reasoning is considered arrogant and oppressive. We are providing syllogistic “therefores” to a “whatever” culture. We’re giving facts to people who want to hear a story. For apologetically inclined evangelists who work hard to provide answers to skeptics, this means our strategies and methods have to change.

Expose the Story. Effective evangelism requires more than just making the case for Christianity convincing; we have to make it *compelling*, both to those who see intellectual curiosity as anathema to faith, and to those who have no intellectual curiosity about it at all. The solution to all this is not to incorporate the culture into the church.

The authenticity our culture craves comes only when we find a way to uphold the clear biblical assumption of objective reality and present it in a unique and captivating way. This needs to be a way that shows that Christianity is not just an assemblage of arguments but that it is the most reasonable explanation for the “the story of reality”⁷ in which we find ourselves.

While our postmodern, post-truth, apathetic “nones” may seem impervious to reason, they can’t help but hold to a narrative about the way the world is. It’s a part of their human nature. The challenge for the evangelist is to find which aspects of that story they presume to have rendered Christianity implausible.⁸ The most effective way to initiate this process is to ask disarming questions and listen — carefully — to the answers.

“Do you ever wonder how it all began?” “Do you believe in justice and human rights?” “Are you tolerant of the views of others?” “What was the message you took from that movie?” “What do you think happens to us when we die?”

The answers to these kinds of questions will form the outline of a story that reveals not only the assumptions it makes about reality but also the inadequacies it attaches to the Christian worldview. Realize that the story you hear rarely will be dominated by a demand for empirical evidence. Most times there are emotional, volitional, or moral concerns that lurk within it. Take them in, and take them seriously.

Reframe the Story. From the assumption that Christianity is “anti-science” to the presumption of its bigoted exclusivism, the culture views the church as repressive and out-of-touch. Knowing the story allows us to recognize and expose its flaws. Fortunately, we have a cumulative-case set of counternarratives at our disposal to do just that.

As an example, it is “common knowledge” in the culture that patriarchal Christianity promotes an inferior, antifeminist view of women. However, a little research shows that first-century women were attracted to Christianity because of its philosophical differences with the surrounding society. Where the Greco-Roman world saw women as inferior to men, Christianity saw them as equally valuable in their ontological status before God. The truth is that women benefited from the Christian views of them that Jesus practiced and Paul introduced in the New Testament, and women served as the force behind the resultant dominance of Christianity as an engine for producing loving change in the world. That’s the story we need to tell.

We can present similar support in discussions about science, human rights, care for the poor and oppressed, the racial repercussions of slavery, or any number of issues that are important to those who have rejected Christianity for the wrong reasons. In fact, there is a strong case to be made that Paul’s “understanding of the meaning of Jesus’ death and resurrection introduced to the world a new picture of reality [and] provided an ontological foundation for ‘the individual’” that is the foundation for classical liberalism and the basis for every social justice topic that concerns the postmodern “nones.”⁹

Recognize that it is the pragmatic quality of the story that is important to the “nones,” and not the speed or authority with which you can deliver it. Either of these can be perceived as arrogance. This is especially true if engaged in an online discussion. Online banter is famous for being impersonal and snarky, but it also allows a time-and-space buffer to do research and consider our responses carefully before we start typing. We need to be deliberate and compassionate in the way we demonstrate how the gospel is connected to the cultural narratives that the “nones” hold dear.

The End of the Story. Many Christians have criticized this kind of evangelistic strategy because they believe it places cultural accommodations ahead of our mission to “just preach the gospel.” A concern for the primacy of the gospel is commendable, but this approach does nothing to diminish it. And it is nothing new.

Jesus trafficked in stories — parables — that drew His listeners in and led them to His saving message. The apostle Paul was thought to be a “babbling” when he first stepped onto the Areopagus in Acts 17, but by the time he had finished, some of the most skeptical minds of his time “became followers of Paul and believed.” Paul knew his audience’s story because he had studied it as thoroughly as they had. He quoted their philosophers, literature, and poets to expose the emptiness of their culture, and then filled the void with the truth of a grander story.

Reframing a cultural narrative cannot be an end in itself. Every story comes to an end, but the gospel’s end is the redemption of mankind. The gospel is propositional

truth, and an evangelist must present it. But engaging narratives and making propositional truth claims are not mutually exclusive. Being effective means we must be prepared to do both. The “nones” may like stories, but if we are serious about evangelizing them, they need to know the only story that really matters. — *Bob Perry*

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NOTES

- 1 “Barna Survey Examines Changes in Worldview among Christians over the Past 13 Years,” Research Releases in Faith and Christianity, Barna Research Group, March 6, 2009, <https://www.barna.com/research/barna-survey-examines-changes-in-worldviewamong-christians-over-the-past-13-years/>.
- 2 Drew Dyck, “The Leavers: Young Doubters Exit the Church,” News: Cultural Trends, *Christianity Today*, November 19, 2010, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2010/november/27.40.html>.
- 3 Michael Lipka, “A Closer Look at America’s Rapidly Growing Religious ‘Nones,’” FACTANK, Pew Research Center, May 13, 2015, <http://www.pewresearch.org/facttank/2015/05/13/a-closer-look-at-americas-rapidly-growing-religious-nones/>.
- 4 Michael Lipka and David McClendon, “Why People with No Religion Are Projected to Decline as a Share of the World’s Population,” FACTTANK: News in the Numbers, Pew Research Center, April 3, 2015, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/04/03/whypeople-with-no-religion-are-projected-to-decline-as-a-share-of-the-worlds-population/>.
- 5 Augustine, *City of God* (10.14), trans. Henry Bettenson (London: Penguin Books, 1987), 392.
- 6 Rodney Stark, *For the Glory of God* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 36.
- 7 This is actually the title of Gregory Koukl’s newest “soft” apologetic work, *The Story of Reality: How the World Began, How It Ends, and Everything Important That Happens in Between* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017). Koukl presents Christianity as an engaging narrative about the world.
- 8 Timothy Keller, “Deconstructing Defeater Beliefs,” New City Church: Resources, <http://www.newcityindy.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/Deconstructing-Defeater-Beliefs>. Tim-Keller.pdf.
- 9 Larry Siedentop, *Inventing the Individual: The Origins of Western Liberalism* (London: Penguin Books, 2014), 63.