

# The Worldview Clash

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In this article, Don Carson argues that in our evangelism we need to confront people with the 'big story' of the Bible.

Don't worry me with questions of culture, or the receptivity of hearers, or frameworks, or worldviews, just let me get on and preach the gospel...

This is a complaint we often hear and part of me wants to sympathize with it. It is crucial that we learn the gospel and proclaim it. But it is also vitally important to understand that the people to whom we speak bring with them their own particular prejudices, backgrounds and biases. The way we go about communicating the gospel will need to vary depending on the audience.

Of course the gospel is the power of God for salvation, and evangelism is a spiritual activity. People are blinded by sin and it is the Holy Spirit who compels belief. However, if the example of Paul is anything to go by, we must address the cultural presuppositions of our hearers so that we do not unwittingly obscure the gospel.

Paul's speech to the Athenians in Acts 17:22-31 is the longest sermon recorded in the New Testament where a Christian is evangelizing people who do not have any knowledge of the Bible. (Compare this with Paul's sermon in Pisidian Antioch in Acts 13 where he is evangelizing people who are familiar with Judaism.) In Athens, he is dealing with people who have never heard of Moses, never read the Old Testament, and are clearly polytheists. They had a different worldview.

Today, in the West, we are in a similar situation. Increasingly, we are dealing with people who are biblically illiterate and hold a modernist or postmodern worldview (or perhaps a combination of both). Up until fairly recently we could presuppose that 80 to 95 per cent of our hearers had a Judeo-Christian worldview, or at least were informed by it. Accordingly, if we were dealing with an atheist we were dealing with a 'Christian atheist' in the sense that the type of God this atheist disbelieved in was the Christian God. Accordingly, in evangelism one could explain the significance of the death and resurrection of Jesus and the need for repentance and it would be fairly well understood.

But that is not the case today. In addressing a generation significantly informed by postmodern thinking there are two main lessons (clearly illustrated in Acts 17) that we need to keep in mind: (1) We need to confront the postmodern worldview with the big story of the Bible; and (2) We need to know where we are going in our evangelism - that is, to a point where people grasp that we are sinful before a holy God and need to be forgiven.

## Presenting the big story

When we train missionaries for cross cultural work, we not only teach them the Bible, we also train them in other areas. We give them courses in cross cultural communication where they are not only taught different languages, they are also taught to understand the different assumptions and thought structures of the people they will encounter.

The policy with New Tribes Mission during the last 15 years has been that when they move into areas where there has been no previous knowledge of the gospel, they start by retelling the Bible's whole storyline. This is considered to be the most effective way of communicating the gospel to people of a different worldview.

A few years ago a friend of mine was working in India. He used to spend his spare time sharing the gospel with the locals. He spoke with many people and there appeared to be many conversions. However, he did not give detailed, big picture Bible teaching. Accordingly, he would often find supposed converts going to Indian temples. When he asked them why they would say things like, "Well, now I'm about 60 per cent Christian and 40 per cent Hindu." Thereafter in his outreach, he started to explain the Bible's whole story line.

This is a practice we should adopt today in the West. Today we are dealing with a major worldview clash. People are not empty discs on which we seek to write new files of truth. Rather their hard drives are clogged with other files. There are some things they need to unlearn because the files they already have on their discs have so many bits that clash with the files (designed by Scripture) that we want to write on them. This communication process takes time and energy.

Postmodern people love narratives (stories). What they hate, however, is the meta-narrative (the big story) that controls all the other narratives. Postmoderns are profoundly suspicious of meta-narratives. They see them as totalizing and manipulative. They see them as making claims to truth that are simply impossible for finite human beings to make.

While postmodern people love stories, their understanding is controlled by their own frame of reference. Somewhere along the line, when telling the story of Jesus, we must fit it within the Bible's meta-narrative. If not, we are miscommunicating Jesus. People may end up thinking that Jesus is not the only way to God, that they can be 60 per cent Christian, or that Jesus came to cure us of our perceived psychological needs.

## Where are you going? the unpopular issue of sin

In evangelizing postmoderns a lot of Christians are very concerned with the question - "How do I get into the conversation?" This is important but it is a second order question. The first order question is - "Where are you trying to go?" A lot of Christians are so concerned about the first question that they overlook the second.

If we cannot agree with postmoderns about the basic problem of the human condition, how can they ever understand the solution? If we do not agree that the problem is as the Bible describes it - rebellion, alienation against God, self-love, and all that the Bible means by sin - then to present Jesus as the solution will mean the hearer will then see Jesus as a kind of fixer of their perceived problems.

The whole area of sin is the hardest issue to deal with these days. For those who do not just laugh at the idea, sin is seen as a social construct. What is sin in one culture is not necessarily a sin in another culture. Guilt has been reduced to a psychological thing that is amassed merely because of the social pressure of your group. But if that is all the hearer thinks sin is, we will not be able to

get across the gospel. The hearer will hear the gospel in merely psychological terms. They might see the death of Jesus as potentially clearing up a psychological problem rather than addressing the concept of sin as seen in scripture - that is, real, objective guilt before a holy God.

My friend, Mark, pastors a church in Washington DC. He is a very gifted 'one on one' evangelist. He has become friends with Claudia Winkler, editor of the National Standard, one of America's most prestigious political newspapers. Claudia was a convinced postmodern. However, she went to Papua New Guinea for work and discovered the story of a Roman Catholic priest who had seduced boys over the previous 35 years. Claudia was horrified by this evil - but she could not even call it evil. Her postmodern presuppositions would not let her.

She talked the situation over with Mark. Mark asked her, "Claudia, was it evil?" She went home and thought about this. She could not sleep. She kept saying to herself, "This was wicked. This was evil." And then it dawned on her that if she had a category for evil, maybe she was evil too. By then she was very close to the Kingdom. (Since then she has become a Christian.)

If people adopt a postmodern epistemology, they will see good and evil as social constructs. That means that in our evangelism, even though it is so desperately unpopular, we must get across the Bible's big storyline which spells out the concept of sin - i.e., that God made us and we owe him. We have rebelled and do rebel against him, and we are hopelessly guilty in his sight. It is such a simple notion to those of us reared in Christian homes but miles away from anything that connects with postmodern epistemology.

### **Paul's example in Athens (Acts 17)**

We now come back to Paul in Athens in Acts 17 and his speech at the Areopagus. Paul confronted a society as different in worldview to the Judeo-Christian worldview as is our current society. For a start, it was a pluralistic society with many gods. It was also extraordinarily pluralistic in its wealth of worldviews (the so called 'philosophies' of groups such as the Stoics and Epicureans).

For our purposes, the important thing to note is the framework Paul establishes in the Areopagus address. He takes a big picture approach. He presents the Judeo-Christian worldview and confronts their diverse Athenian worldviews, before introducing Jesus.

We can read Paul's address in Acts 17 in about two minutes. However, addresses in the Areopagus could go on for hours. This suggests that every clause in Paul's address is a point that was expounded upon at length. If we want to know what Paul would have said on a particular point, in virtually every case Paul has some treatment of that point elsewhere in his New Testament writings. He starts by saying, "I see that in every way you are very religious."

Paul here is neither commending nor denying their religious practices. Rather he is noting their interest in spiritual things. He goes on to say, "I even found an altar with this inscription: 'To an Unknown God.'" In Athenian culture, there were so many gods with so many domains that, in an effort to ensure they did not miss one and suffer the consequences, they had an altar to an unknown god.

Paul perceives a deeper ignorance in their worship of an 'unknown god': "What you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you." Paul claims that God is knowable. He is being polite, but a challenge has been cast down. He then goes on to establish that God "made the world and everything in it". God, Paul says, is transcendent. Being distinct from the universe, he is not a pantheistic being. Paul is providing a doctrine of creation, thus ruling out the idea that gods make other gods who make other gods until we finally get down to a god who is willing to soil his hands by making something material. Paul is saying that we have one God who made everything.

He then says that God "is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands." God cannot be domesticated by religion. Paul is not denying that God disclosed himself in special ways in the Old Testament temple. What he is saying is that at the end of the day you cannot domesticate God by properly performing sacrifices and religious rites so as to squeeze blessings out of him.

God "is not served by human hands as if he needed anything." God is self-existent - not only in terms of his origins but in terms of his independence. He does not need us at all. Rather it is we who are completely and utterly dependent on God, right down to our very breathing - "he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else." This is quite a reversal of the first century pagan perspective, and of many contemporary popular perceptions of God.

He then says, "From one man he created every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth" - thus highlighting the fact that all people have the same ancestor. Many of the ancients thought that different races had different origins. Paul then hints that something is wrong: "God did this so that men should seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us." This says that there is a need to seek God, but suggests that the human race is alienated from him. It also establishes that however transcendent God is, he is also immanent - he is everywhere, inescapable, and always near us.

Paul has now established an entire framework, and challenged the Athenian worldview at many points, before moving on to sin. He now deals with sin in a fundamental way. He also confronts the dominant Greek view of history - that history is cyclical. The biblical revelation speaks of history as having a beginning, then a period of time during which God does certain things, and then a finally an end. Paul says that "In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but that now he commands all people everywhere to repent because He has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed."

Paul at the Areopagus in Athens has established an entire frame of reference before he gets to Jesus. He has challenged the Greek worldview with his Judeo-Christian worldview. If he had presented clichés like 'Jesus died for your sins' before he had established the appropriate frame of reference, people would necessarily have misunderstood what he was saying.

We too, today, in our biblically illiterate society need to establish this biblical framework. This might take five minutes, five hours or five years, but at some stage we have to do it.

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