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Evangelism in a Post-Truth World

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EVANGELISM IN A POST-TRUTH WORLD
Session 1: Setting the Scene

1. Introduction: What's the problem that we are addressing today?

We suspect that some Christians are losing confidence in sharing the good news of Jesus with non-Christian friends and family. In part that may have to do with Christians feeling that they are now living as a minority in a cherished pluralistic culture and because of this social context the sense that Christianity is 'True' is increasingly difficult to hold to, or persuade others about.

The aim is to help us to build people's confidence in their own ability to share the gospel with others.

HOW WILL WE BEGIN TO ADDRESS THESE ISSUES?

1. We will explore the nature of the Gospel.
2. We will touch on some of the cultural themes that are prevalent in our social context.
3. We will reflect on our own personal stories to try and discern any significant patterns.
4. We will touch on strategies that may be helpful for ourselves and for those we minister with.

This is the first of a series of sessions on evangelism where other aspects of this part of our discipleship will be covered, so inevitably there will be issues NOT covered today that will be covered in other sessions.

2. A Starting Point

All of these conversations are about people living different lives, facing different issues, asking different questions. In all our generalising, it's important to keep on remembering that before we speak, we need to listen.

They are loved by God and pursued by him.

They might have been hurt/disappointed by church in the past.
They might be 'lapsed' Christians
They might be unaware
They might be searching
They might be in other faith traditions.
They might be hostile.
They might be intrigued.
They might be uninterested.
They might be sympathetic.

TOGETHER IN 2S:

Reflect on your conversations with the two people who are not-yet Christians.

- What questions do they have?
- How open are they to the Christian faith?
- What is appealing about Christianity to them?
- What are the barriers for them?
- What would help you share the gospel with them?

KEY INSIGHTS

EVANGELISM IN A POST-TRUTH WORLD
Session 1: Setting the Scene

3. Some Definitions

3.1 THE THREE PARTS OF THE CHRISTIAN LIFE[1]
Discipleship-Ministry-Mission

Discipleship: developing a life with God, shaped as part of a community of believers as well as close relationships with others within the wider creation.
Ministry: whatever is done among and within the body of believers to build up that body or enable the body to practise its convictions together.
Mission: Living out all the implications of one's personal discipleship and the ministry of the gathered and scattered body of believers in the wider world.

Our job as ministers/leaders is to grow as disciples, develop the ministry to the church and encourage and enable the mission of the gathered/scattered church.

The Mission of the Church: To Love the World
We are involved in mission because Jesus was. He was sent and so are we. Jesus is Lord of all creation, the earth belongs to him.

> 'He is the landlord, and we are his tenants. The earth is his property, and we are stewards of it, accountable to him for what we do on and with it.
>
> So our mission is to the ends of the earth and until the end of the world - for all time and space on this planet. All disciples, all followers of Jesus are mandated to obey this self-replicating instruction.'[2]

Wright outlines our mission as including:
1. Building the church through discipleship and evangelism.
2. Serving society through compassion and justice.
3. Stewarding creation through godly use of resources in ecological care and through work and vocation.[3]

3.2 THE ACTIVITY: EVANGELISM
The mission of the church has to keep all these elements present, but in reality evangelism feels the most challenging.

Our task as leaders is to engage in evangelism ourselves, give confidence to others to be involved and to create contexts in which it can happen through the church community.

> 'To evangelize is to spread the good news that Jesus Christ died for our sins and was raised from the dead according to the Scriptures, and that as the reigning Lord he now offers the forgiveness of sins and the liberating gifts of the Spirit to all who repent and believe.
>
> Our Christian presence in the world is indispensable to evangelism, and so is that kind of dialogue whose purpose is to listen sensitively in order to understand. But evangelism itself is the proclamation of the historical, biblical Christ as Saviour and Lord, with a view to persuading people to come to him personally and so be reconciled to God.

KEY INSIGHTS

[1] Sam Wells, Incarnational Mission: Being with the World, (Eerdmans 2018), loc. 246 Kindle edition

[2] Christopher Wright, Here are Your Gods, (IVP 2020), 117

[3] Wright, 119,120

In issuing the gospel invitation we have no liberty to conceal the cost of discipleship. Jesus still calls all who would follow him to deny themselves, take up their cross, and identify themselves with his new community.

The results of evangelism include obedience to Christ, incorporation into his Church and responsible service in the world.' [4]

IN 4S:
- What do you appreciate about this definition?
- Is there anything you might have wanted to add to it?

3.3 THE CONTENT: THE GOSPEL
It includes me but is about more than me. Our generation has seen the understanding of the gospel to move away from the preaching about a crisis moment to a more widely contextualised gospel.

1 Corinthians 15:1-8

Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. [2] By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain.

[3] For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, [4] that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, [5] and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve. [6] After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. [7] Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, 8 and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.

Romans 1:1-6

Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God – [2] the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures [3] regarding his Son, who as to his earthly life was a descendant of David, [4] and who through the Spirit of holiness was appointed the Son of God in power by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord. [5] Through him we received grace and apostleship to call all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith for his name's sake. [6] And you also are among those Gentiles who are called to belong to Jesus Christ.

NOTES

1 Corinthians:
1. It's an account of the Messiah
2. The power of sin has been broken
3. It's in accordance with the whole Bible
4. You can be saved by holding to this good news.

KEY INSIGHTS

[4] The Lausanne Covenant, https://www.lausanne.org/content/covenant/lausanne-covenant (I Cor. 15:3,4; Acts 2: 32-39; John 20:21; I Cor. 1:23; II Cor. 4:5; 5:11,20; Luke 14:25-33; Mark 8:34; Acts 2:40,47; Mark 10:43-45)

EVANGELISM IN A POST-TRUTH WORLD
Session 1: Setting the Scene

Romans:
1. Jesus is the climax of the story.
2. He is the Lord of a new stage of history
3. The resurrection is central.
4. It's about obedience
5. It's a summons to believe, not just information.
6. Jesus is the new Lord of all. [5]

AN ATTEMPT TO PRESENT A BIGGER 'GOSPEL':
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kCVcSiUUMhY

PRESENTING THE BIGGER GOSPEL AS A BETTER STORY

IN 2S:
- Think about the people you shared the gospel with.
- What would be helpful about this presentation of the 'big story' as gospel to them?
- How have they responded to the historical declaration of the gospel as presented in Romans and Corinthians?

KEY INSIGHTS

[5] Based on N.T. Wright, Paul and the Faithfulness of God (London: SPCK: 2013) 518, 523-524.

EVANGELISM IN A POST-TRUTH WORLD
Session 2: A Culture that is LONGING for Something

4. The Social Context: A Post-Truth Society

'Post-Truth' was The Oxford English Dictionary's 'word of the year' in 2016. It refers to the tendency of society to accept that objective facts are less influential in shaping opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.'[6]

In Fours

- Where do you see evidence of us living in a 'Post-Truth' society?

- Discuss some of the temptations that living in a Post-Truth world present to those engaged in evangelism.

4.1 WHAT HAPPENS TO FAITH?

A couple of specific suggestions.

1. **As the world increasingly becomes secular, we accept that faith is private belief.**
   It is the easiest way to deal with the complexity of a world that looks askance at people of faith. People do not stop believing, they simply stop believing that it has any direct connection to their public life. A personal faith becomes a private affair. Christian disciplines are privatised and located in the domestic or leisure periods of people's lives. Evangelism withers and dies.

   It's a challenge for those in the public eye. Tracy Ullman's sketch highlights the issue with searing accuracy.

   To read and watch another time: https://www.christiantoday.com/article/tracey-ullmans-as-a-christian-sketches-whats-she-getting-at/105415.htm.

2. **We limit ourselves to offering a therapeutic gospel and so respond to felt needs and so 'tailor' the gospel to these sorts of issues.**
   I want to feel loved for who I am, to be pitied for what I've gone through, to feel intimately understood, to be accepted unconditionally;

   I want to experience a sense of personal significance and meaningfulness, to be successful in my career, to know my life matters, to have an impact;

   I want to gain self-esteem, to affirm that I am okay, to be able to assert my opinions and desires;

   I want to be entertained, to feel pleasure in the endless stream of performances that delight my eyes and tickle my ears;

KEY INSIGHTS

[6] https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/nov/15/post-truth-named-word-of-the-year-by-oxford-dictionaries

> I want a sense of adventure, excitement, action, and passion so that I experience life as thrilling and moving.[7]

Together Round Tables

- What challenges posed by secularism are faced by people in the church you belong to in their everyday lives?

- What would help them face these challenges?

- What's the problem with the therapeutic gospel?

5. And Yet... What Bridges for the Gospel are Offered in a Post-Truth Culture?

James Smith reflecting on Charles Taylor's work, A Secular Age, writes:

> He points out that our world is not about fundamentalist atheism vs religion, there is a much murkier middle ground, the 'haunted age', an age in which we are surrounded by the ghosts of the gods we once worshipped. But 'faith is fraught; confession is haunted by an inescapable sense of its contestability. We don't believe instead of doubting; we believe while

KEY INSIGHTS

[7] D. Powlinson, *The Therapeutic Gospel*, https://www.9marks.org/article/therapeutic-gospel/

doubting. We're all Thomas now.'[8]

The 'hauntedness' of the age includes a search for experiential meaning and community.

KEY INSIGHTS

5.1. WHAT 'THE NONES' HAVE IN COMMON WITH THE RELIGIOUS

A desire for:

- Sense.
- Fulfilment.
- Connection.

5.2 'SPIRITUAL HAUNTEDNESS' IN EXTREME TIMES: EXEMPLIFIED IN THE MANCHESTER VIGILS, MAY 2017

We have developed familiar liturgies. We gather together, we light candles, we sing, we say 'terrorism won't win', we declare our hopes that evil will not have the last word, we offer prayers to who-ever.

Our response can be: all you hope for is true and real and contains a deeper mystery. There is a light that shines in the darkness and the darkness will never overcome him.

5.3 SPIRITUAL HAUNTEDNESS IN POP CULTURE: SONIC CATHEDRALS

The Style
The significance of 'Big Music': grand, sweeping, serious.

'So even though soul isn't something you readily associate with Coldplay, I think this is the direction they're pushing in: they're just more querulous, more abstract, even less sexual. They're not evangelicals – they're meeker and more doubting – but you don't need to name the higher power behind the Big Music for the emotional effect to be felt. And so it's no surprise that there's been a

[8]J.K.A. Smith, *How (not) to be secular: Reading Charles Taylor*, (Eerdmans 2014), 4.

resurgence in this strain of epic pop recently, as a possible reaction to a constant background noise about music's loss of value, its reduction to commodity status. Borrowing the tactics and longings of religion is a great way to telegraph meaning – even if it makes for hollow art.

When I see religious art, I tend to admire it but not connect with it on any gut emotional level. As an atheist, I see a stained-glass apocalypse, and I can coolly reconstruct the awe, excitement, and fear that might have bubbled up in the medieval mind. But I can't feel it. And the same – for all its beauty – goes for gospel. But the Big Music – deploying the emotion of religion within an aesthetic I do relate to – can sometimes push buttons I don't necessarily want pushed. At its frequent worst, it triggers the same disgusted flight-impulse a TV preacher might. At its rare best, though, it makes me want to believe.'[9]

To watch on another occasion: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qtY6O21m5N8.

ON TABLES

- Have you seen examples of this longing for spiritually in your context?
- How does being reminded of living in a spiritually haunted age encourage evangelism?
- What is the role of the church community in this?
- What can evangelism look like in a spiritually haunted age?

KEY INSIGHTS

[9]Tom Ewing, Sonic Cathedrals: How epic rock has turned into secular gospel, and what that says about us. October 28, 2011 http://pitchfork.com/features/poptimist/8698-sonic-cathedrals/

EVANGELISM IN A POST-TRUTH WORLD
Session 3: Remembering Your Story

SPEED-RELATING: (15 MINS)
Half of the room take a seat at one of the tables, the other half will be the ones moving round.

Listen to four people share their story of how they came to faith in Christ. Take two minutes each.

Take notes as you listen:

- What things were important in these stories?

- What part did other people play?

- What were some of the most helpful things that happened?

- What things were less than helpful?

KEY INSIGHTS

EVANGELISM IN A POST-TRUTH WORLD
Session 3: Remembering Your Story

ON YOUR OWN: (UP TO 10 MINUTES TO PROCESS)
Are there any principles you can extract from these stories?

ON TABLES: UP TO 20 MINUTES
What are your findings?

LISTEN:
Three tables to present to the room and the rest to check that nothing was missed. (15 minutes)

KEY INSIGHTS

EVANGELISM IN A POST-TRUTH WORLD
Session 4: Enabling Confidence

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF FAITHFUL PRESENCE AND FAITHFUL IMPROVISATION

1. Building Evangelistic Confidence in Your Own Ministry Areas

- What might evangelism look like in regular sermons/services?
    - What helps you do this?
- What might evangelism look like in christenings, weddings, funerals?
    - What does 'good' look like in these contexts?
- What might evangelism look like in pastoral visits and community engagement?
    - How do you begin the conversations?

2. Building Evangelistic Confidence in Your Church

Everywhere is different!

- Use evangelistic resources with church so that they can experience them and then invite people the second time it is offered.
- Help people develop a vocabulary for their own faith.
- Help them see it as a natural overflow.
- Help them see God-moments.
- Encourage spiritual renewal.
- Give opportunities to practise together.
- Pray for them.
- Encourage & celebrate stories.
- Be patient.

Build Confidence – begin with signs of presence and develop through prayer.

KEY INSIGHTS

3. Developing Confidence for Scattered Church

1. Offer Picture of Personal Missional Living.

- LICC's Fruitfulness on the Frontline. [10]
- 6Ms.
  - **Consistency**: Making Good Work, Modelling Godly Character, Ministering Grace and Love.
  - **Courage**: Moulding Courage, Mouthpiece for Truth and Justice, Messenger of Gospel.

2. Offer Simple Strategies of Evangelistic Mission for an Individual.

E.g. The Story of 4 Tables:

Work Table - Coffee Table - Dining Table - Lord's Table

3. Make it about Joy not Obligation.

Wells suggests that the whole process of 'mission with' involves:

- Presence – so recognise where you already are.
- Attention – we don't need 'pre-packaged' approaches. It's this person in the moment.
- Mystery – what's happening here?
- Delight – it's a privilege when people open up to you.
- Participation – take your time. Big things take time to change.
- Enjoyment – the process is one started by God so enjoy the twists and turns.
- Glory – God is with us in Christ. [11]

4. Peter's Strategy of Mission from Below 1 Peter 2:13–3:22

For Peter, mission is the action of a 'royal priesthood'. The question he answers is how this is to be practised. Peter proposes a policy of submission as a subversive mode of mission:

2:13-15 Submission to 'every human authority' so that 'by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of the foolish.'

2:18-20 Submission of slaves to masters. There are times when their masters act unjustly. The responses of the slaves are not to be determined by the actions of masters. When slaves are mistreated, Peter argues that it is 'commendable before God' (v20) because they will find themselves in the same position as their saviour.

3:1-6 Wives are enjoined to submission to their non-believing husbands so that the religion of the household can be changed.

KEY INSIGHTS

[10] https://licc.org.uk/ourresources/fruitfulness/

[11] Wells, loc. 212-237 Kindle edition

EVANGELISM IN A POST-TRUTH WORLD
Session 4: Enabling Confidence

3:7 Husbands are (unexpectedly) encouraged to act 'in the same way' ...

The passage begins with Peter directing his readers to a posture of submission, and after weaving the story and teaching of Jesus' sufferings into the context of his readers' situations, leads them to the Christological climax of resurrection and ascension, 'with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him.' (verse 22)

IN 4S

- What have you been reminded of today?

- What has been most helpful?

- What might you do next?

KEY INSIGHTS