

SERMON TRANSCRIPT

10.04.2026 | Evangelizing to a Post-Christian Culture | Acts 17:22–34 | Dr. Clark Fobes, Associate Pastor

We may all be seated and as you're being seated, you can get out your Bibles and we're actually gonna be back in the book of Acts. I know we left the book of Acts and so it's confusing. We're back in it now, but this is just one text that I believe is maybe the most important one when talking about this topic, evangelizing a post-Christian culture and just gives us so much in here. We'll read verses 22 to 34 and we're not gonna dissect so much this passage. We'll be back in Acts probably next spring or in the summer sometime and so passage of Ben will have a chance or whoever's preaching that will have a chance to go deeper into the text. We're really gonna use it as a way to just learn from the Apostle Paul in how we evangelize the culture that was unfamiliar with the gospel, one that's similar to us today.

And I don't like to like toot my own horn, but if there's one area that I might be kind of an expert in, it is this topic. My doctoral work in dissertation was in this idea of evangelizing a culture that's unfamiliar with Christianity. And so some of what I might say might seem a little paradigm shifting, especially if you grew up a certain way in church and hopefully you can just trust me as one of your pastors to lovingly lead you through this and know that there's a wealth of footnotes behind this sermon that I didn't wanna spend the time to quote like 20 scholars and bore you all to death and not make it a lecture, but hopefully to lead us in a way that just picks up some better practices, I think, for how do we evangelize in a post-Christian culture. And so I really do believe and hope this would be helpful for us as a church as we think about this call where we are in our city of San Francisco in a post-Christian city and be faithful as well, not just to sharing the gospel, but faithful to what's laid out for us in scripture as we'll see.

So let's look at the book of Acts 17 starting in verse 22. So Paul standing in the midst of the Areopagus said, "In the name of Athens, I perceive that in every way you're very religious. For as I pass along and observe the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, to the unknown God. Would therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it being Lord of heaven and earth does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands as though he needed anything since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. And he made from one man, every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place that they should seek God and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he's actually not far from each one of us. For in him we live and move and have our being. As even some of your own prophets have said, for we are indeed his offspring. Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man. The times of ignorance got overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. Because he's fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed. And of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead. Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked, but others said, we will hear you again about this. So Paul went out from their midst, but some men joined him and believed, among whom were also Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them.

You know, we're in the series on being sent and really just asking the question, how are we sent as ambassadors for God in a broken world? And I think evangelism is one of the spiritual disciplines of the Christian life that can seem quite daunting for a number of reasons. A couple weeks ago, Pastor Ben mentioned that we're all sent the way Jesus is sent. And then last week we talked about how we are all sent to have people that were to lead to Christ. And this really just builds off that to ask the question, well, how do we actually go about communicating the gospel, especially in the cultural milieu that we live in here in San Francisco? And I think to be honest, sharing the gospel is a little bit daunting because we don't have very many good models of how to do it in this day and age. I think most of our models of evangelism are a little bit outdated. We might think about the street preacher on the corner that has a megaphone shouting at people that they're gonna go to hell if they don't repent and believe in Jesus. Or we think of people holding up signs, randomly talking to strangers on the streets. And that can be a really scary thing, especially if you're an introvert and you're not used to just randomly walking up to people. And let me just be honest too, especially if you're like my wife, a small Asian woman, who's also an introvert. It may seem really daunting to just walk up to a stranger, strike up a conversation, and hope that it leads to the gospel. And I think even when the time comes to sharing the gospel, even when we're talking with people, we may have a little bit of paralysis because we quite frankly don't always even know what to say. How much should we share about the gospel? How bold should we be? Is it even the right avenue or time to share something that can be quite offensive in our culture today?

You know, this reminds me of a time when I first moved back to San Francisco and I randomly just happened to stumble upon an old high school friend in a coffee shop. We were both there to work on our graduate school studies. So we decided to sit together and we started catching up and talking. And I eventually came out, told him I was a pastor. And he leaned and he said, "Oh, sir, you one of those Christians that hate gay people?" And I remember in the moment I was just like, "Whoa, this went really deep and dark really fast." But it caught me off guard and it caught me in a moment wondering, well, what do I say to this? Of course I don't hate gay people, but I wanna be honest with his question and not skirt the issue. And it was just one of those moments where I realized I needed to be a little bit more equipped of not to apologetically or handle with apologetic answers his questions, but rather how do I engage in a way that leads people to see the truth of who Jesus is?

We live in what many call a post-Christian culture and especially in San Francisco and you may hear that term thrown around a lot and to be called post-Christian quite simply just means that Christianity has fallen out of favor in our culture, especially here in San Francisco. Or another way to think about being in a post-Christian culture is that our culture and our city simply don't live with the assumptions of Christian belief anymore. And a question that I have often heard people express is, how do you share the gospel then in a culture that seems to have no concept of universal morality? Or put another way, how do you evangelize a culture that doesn't believe it's sinful? And how do you show it its need of a savior without the problem of sin? And I think this is what Paul will help us answer just three ways through this chapter, this passage of Acts 17 of how do we evangelize in a post-Christian culture?

I think the first thing that the Apostle Paul shows us here in his engagement in Athens is that we should evangelize conversationally. That's our first point, you can fill in the blank there, evangelize conversationally. You know, I think when we think of this term evangelize, we tend to think of preaching. And there's some good reason for that, it's because this term for evangelize, Ewingelizo comes from, is the verb form of the noun, Ewingelion, which is the word for gospel in the Greek. This word means to proclaim or herald the good news. And so we think about preaching as the main way of evangelizing. And this is why and where we've gotten some of previous evangelistic methods like the four spiritual laws, the Roman road, things like evangelism explosion that became popular in the 1960s and 70s out of Florida that really just asked based evangelism on these two questions, if you were to die today, where would you go? And then I'll follow up to that, if you went to the gates of heaven, why should Jesus let you in?

And evangelism by definition does mean telling, speaking of the good news, but I think sometimes we maybe have mixed up the method or the mode of evangelism and reduced it simply to preaching. Preaching is actually not the most prominent way we see the apostle Paul evangelize in the book of Acts. If you were to chart all the book of Acts, all the times the apostle Paul engages with people in some way, and we have some detail of that, there are 35 instances that he's engaging with people with the gospel. Of those 35, 13 use pretty generic terms for heralding the good news or just speaking, but there's no further details about what he's doing there. Two of them describe the apostle Paul as teaching from the scriptures, usually in the synagogues. Seven does say that he proclaimed or preached or spoke boldly when the opportunity arose. But there's 13 more that remain, the vast majority, you know the majority of these, they mentioned that Paul engages by reasoning, persuading, conversing. This is from the Greek word, diolegomy, from which we get our word dialogue. Means to reason, converse to exchange ideas. And this is precisely what the apostle Paul is found doing here in Athens. If you look a little bit further back in verse 17, we're told that Paul reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there.

Now we have to assume that Paul is not just preaching at them when we're told he's reasoning, he's dialoguing, he's conversing, he's learning about what they believe and exchanging ideas with them. You know the classic term for preach, to preach that we get in the epistles or to preach the word is a different word, kerosos, which only shows up twice in all of the book of Acts in relation to the apostle Paul. And I think this is a correction we need maybe in our western forms of evangelism, where we have reduced evangelism to just going out and talking at people. I think we're so used to talking at people in evangelism because we favor this very black and white propositional truth or propositional method of evangelism. We've become so accustomed, I think this may be one of the ways that we need to do some deconstructing with our faith in the west, where we've married it so much to more of a western empire mentality that we think we have a message to go and give to others and we have nothing that we need to learn from them. I think that's a problem because it puts us in a position where we're always just talking at people and not dialoguing and engaging with people. See the gospel, it takes time to invest in people and that time is invested in conversation.

You know, it's easy to go out and talk to people on the street. Now you may not agree with that, you may think it's really hard to go and talk to people on the street, but just kind of think about it for a moment. If we only think about evangelism as randomly talking to people on the street, it's actually quite easy. You can just go talk to people, drop some bombs what they don't believe that you believe and then walk away. They don't know your life. You don't have to engage them ever again. If you get an argument, you never have to see them again. Now as much as I am for short-term mission trips or sending out the London team, I do think there's some merit and value to that. I think it's actually much harder to share the gospel with people who know you because you can't hide behind this facade of spirituality of just sharing the gospel. They know your life, they know your shortcomings. Think about who are the hardest people to evangelize to. Almost always it's family members, isn't it? Because they're the people that if you have a disagreement, you can't just choose not to see them anymore. They're constantly in your life.

And I actually think that's intentionally the people that God wants to send us to. See evangelism, it takes time to invest in the relational conversing with people. This may even sound contrary to what the apostle Paul has found doing. He's just talking in the marketplace. But you notice how often Paul is here in the marketplace. Luke tells us he's reasoning every day. Probably he's meeting the same people that are coming by his tent-making shop. He's reasoning multiple Sabbaths in the synagogue with the Jews. If you were to look into a study of all of the apostle Paul's time in his missionary journeys, probably the shortest amount of time he ever spent in one place was three weeks in Thessalonica. Every other time he's found being there much longer than that. Meaning even when he was engaging with strangers or people he didn't know before, he was doing so and taking the time to invest in them.

But even then, most of the time, the apostle Paul is not found evangelizing randomly on the streets doing random evangelism. Again, if you were to look at the apostle Paul's ministry efforts or endeavors throughout the book of Acts, all the cities that he enters and does some significant ministry, you'd find about 18 of them. Out of those 18 cities, only twice is Paul mentioned going to public spaces randomly talking with people. One of them is here in Athens and the other is in Ephesus when he goes to a public lecture hall. Every other time, where does he go first? He goes to the synagogue where he knows he can find Jewish people with the same ethnic background as him. People who are familiar with the scriptures he's reasoning from. Even Gentile God fears that have some favorability towards the God whom he's talking about. Now this is not just to say that the apostle Paul went to places that was easier to share the gospel or people that are already familiar with the Christian faith. They weren't, they were Jewish, this was a new faith. I think a better way to see this and what many scholars identify is that when the apostle Paul goes to synagogues, it's because he's going to the places that he already had some relational connection to.

This was the extension of what was known as the *oikos* in Greek. This term *oikos* literally can be translated as home or family, but it's much more than just your physical home or your nuclear family. For them, the home and family extended to the village. It was the relational and tribal network that you were connected to through your bloodline, your ethnicity, your language, your heritage. And it's this *oikos* that Paul is always going to in the synagogue first, because he had these ethnic ties to the Jewish people. He probably had some familiarity with them already. Maybe many of them even knew of who he was and his radical transformation, because remember, the apostle Paul studied under the famous Gamaliel, who was one of the most renowned Jewish teachers in the law. See, Paul went to those people he already had some relational connection to, even if he was meeting them for the first time.

I kind of liken this to Asian circles. I know not everyone's Asian, this may happen in your circles too, but I'm half Korean, and something that we say in Korean circles is every Korean has two degrees of separation from each other. I was just at an Asian American Christian conference and meeting some people, and I was talking to some that some fellow Koreans that I met, and as soon as I met one, we'd always say, oh, do you know Paul Kim or David Park? And the question is usually, well, which one? Cerritos Paul Kim or LA Paul Kim? Or SF Paul Kim, there's so many, but we're two degrees of separation away from each other, which immediately gives some rapport and trust and closeness with each other. And I think when we think about evangelism, we should probably take this idea of the *oikos* a little bit more. Rather than thinking, well, who are the random people I can meet on a chance encounter today, it's much more hard and intentional to ask the question, who are part of my *oikos*? People that I already have some connection to that maybe I've just been ignoring or failing to tell or talk to about the gospel, because it's scary, it's hard, because they know me. And those are

yet the very same people that God wants to send us to today. It's those people whom God is sending us to bring up on the rooftop to meet our friend Jesus, friends of ours.

I think this is part of the way we can think about evangelism in a post-Christian culture too. Again, I'm not saying that we should not do any random evangelism. I think there's a place and there's a time and place for that, but I think in our post-Christian culture, random encounters are seen as much more suspicious than favorable. Because if you were to just go out, maybe walk down Hayes Valley and just randomly start to talk with someone, someone does that with you, what's your first inclination? You wanna sell me something. You're just here for my money or my signature, like the people at Patricia Green's are always doing when they're tabling or advocating. Or think about if someone were to go to the house and knock on the door today. I know some of us come from an era where I used to walk to my friend's house, knock on the door, say hey, can Nick come out and play? But we don't live in that society anymore. When someone knocks on my door today, there's usually three assumptions I have. Either this person is a solicitor trying to sell me something, they're a burglar trying to rob me, or they're Jehovah's Witness and I don't know which of those three is worse. (Audience Laughing) And so when people come to my door, we literally just, we stop and say, wait, don't move, pretend we're not home. And maybe they'll go away. Jehovah's Witness, yeah.

See, much better I think is to ask the question, there are already people in my life God has sent me to, and he wants me to invest the time and the conversation with them. Evangelism, I've said this before in one of our 9am's, evangelism was never meant to be a drive-by activity, where you drive in, shoot them up and peel away and never talk to them again. It was meant to take time. And I think taking the time to invest actually takes the pressure off of getting it right in one go. Maybe some of the reason we've been so conditioned to think of a package presentation for the gospel is because that's the main way we've thought about evangelism. But if we think about evangelism as time spent in conversation, multiple conversations, then actually it takes the pressure off to just get it right all the time, because we know there will be a chance for more conversations.

Even just think about the Apostle Paul's example here. You know, if there was ever a time where you'd think, all right Paul, this is it, this is your chance, you have a captive audience, you better drive it home, you better get the gospel right, and yet what does Paul do? Does he ever mention the name of Jesus before the Areopagus? Not once. Do you ever mention the atonement, the crucifixion? Never. I mean, by all of our modern Western accounts, Paul is an evangelistic failure. But it's because Paul has already spent time investing in conversation before and after. It ends with this detail in verse 32 of people even in their mocking saying in verse 32, "We will hear you again about this." See, Paul knew he would have another chance that took the pressure off. And so I think evangelizing conversationally is really curious about people.

We shouldn't just think of evangelism as talking at others, but if it's a dialogue, a conversation, Christians should be one of the most curious people to get to know others. Curiosity, I think it shows a lot of things. They want it shows a humility, that even though we have the truth, we don't only want to tell people the truth and not hear from them. It shows a love and care that we want to get to know people. And it shows this desire and compassion that if we really do have something meaningful to share, we want to know someone enough to share it with them in a way that will be understandable to them. Paul was able to learn enough in these brief moments in Athens, however many weeks he was there, that he could actually repeat back some of the pop culture references to them. It's possible Paul already knew some of these philosophies before, but he at least was curious enough and observant enough to spot the unknown altar. He was curious, he had his eyes open, he wanted to learn about people.

And see, I think part of the problem of just a purely preaching or propositional approach to evangelism is that we don't slow down enough to be curious about people. So that when we preach the gospel only in evangelism, at best it will feel foreign to those we're talking to, and at worst it just reduces people to a project. But if people are people made in God's image, curiosity is the least we can give them. And it allows us to know people enough to reach their hearts. I think there's a lot of people that have talked about this conversational approach, getting to know people in evangelism, but one of my favorites is a man I actually studied by the name of John Lemmiston Nevius who lived in the 1800s in China, preaching the gospel to a culture that was unfamiliar with the gospel.

In writing about him, his wife said that though he believed public preaching had its place, John Nevius believed that the conversational approach was far more effective and faithful. This is what he wrote in his manual for evangelists to Chinese evangelists, local Chinese believers in 1866. He said, "There are people who think that because they lack eloquence or literary talent, they cannot spread the faith. They do not realize that being good at building relationships and winning people's favor is in fact a crucial part of effective persuasion and moral guidance." It's a skill that leads to success. You know what Nevius believed is that if every believer was sent on mission, then every believer to engage in conversation and be a part of this evangelism. And I think the more that we take up this curiosity to know the people we're talking to, the more we can evangelize in a way that connects to their beliefs and their heart. And this goes to our second point to evangelize with gospel connections.

Yeah, I think it's fascinating that Paul's not really in a hurry to get to the gospel. I think before in a previous era when I was being trained in evangelism, the main thing people used to say is, just get to the gospel, just speak the gospel and you've evangelized. And again, I think there's a place for that, but Paul is not in a rush to get there. He slows down and starts to use their own cultural messaging and pop culture references. If you look at verse 23, he says, "I pass along and observe the objects of your worship. I found an altar with this inscription to the unknown God, what therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you." And he goes on to talk about the God who made the heavens. This is a pretty radical statement. Paul's looking at one of their altars and he's saying, "You're worshipping this one unknown God. Let me reveal to you a God that makes himself known that even you have this longing in your heart to know him." See, he's not scared of the culture's messaging or pop culture references to just dismiss it and demonize it or correct it. He actually affirms some truth in the human heart and longing and uses it to point to the gospel. And then he goes on to even quote some of their own prophets and even more affirm the truth they say there. Look at verse 27 and 28. "They should seek God and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he's actually not far from each one of us for in him we live and move and have our being. And even some of your own poets have said, for we are indeed his offspring."

Now, you know a little secret here? Both of these are in quotations. Neither of these are Old Testament references. They are both references from Grecian poets, one by the name of Epimenides of Crete and another by Aristas from this poem Phenomena. And in the Phenomena, Aristas' poem is about looking at the constellations and the stars and reading and divining from them. It was literally ancient astrology. I don't know if anyone's into that. Sometimes my wife will send me these means about Scorpios and Geminis, that's what we are and how incompatible we are. It's literally astrology. I was just for fun for us, but this was legitimate astrology, divining from the sky and this constellations. And yet the apostle Paul could quote from that. "Not to affirm the truth of astrology, but to affirm the truth of the longing of it." See again, he was not scared by cultural messages, but he was able to say that we can use the culture's messages to point the culture to the ultimate truth it's longing for.

I have a friend who's a veteran youth pastor by the name of Walt Mueller. And he says that culture is often, one of the ways we can think about culture is it's a map and a mirror. It's a mirror that reflects to us what culture believes in this moment, but it's also a map that can help us see where culture is going. And I think one of the things we can do as faithful evangelists is to pay attention to some of those prominent cultural messages today. I think it's one of the reasons why Christians shouldn't withdraw from culture, but engage with it lovingly, discerningly, not taking everything but parsing it out and discerning how we can see and learn more about the culture we live in. I think it's okay for Christians to consume non-Christian media for this reason.

Let me just give you an example of one of the ways I think we see this today, of where the culture has a prominent message and it points us to some longing that we can use to point it to Christ. Yeah, I think one of the one popular cultural messaging today is this idea of the multiverse. If you're familiar with comic books and the MCU, you're very familiar with this, it's prominent now with this upcoming Domsday movie, Avengers Domsday and the Secret Wars, it's all about the multiverse, all these iterations of people and choices we make and different versions of ourself. But it's actually springing up in a lot of other different cultural messaging. There's another popular movie that won an Oscar a few years ago called Everything Everywhere All At Once, there's a popular Apple TV show today called Dark Matter, which is an onscreen adaptation of a Blake Crouch novel, and there's a pair of books that I really enjoy called Midnight Library and Midnight Train. See, all of these deal with the question of the path not taken.

The what if, what if we had made a different decision in life, and with all of these media, modes of media, they all really ask the same question, they're all enamored with the process of choice at our fingertips. For a number of reasons, I think one because we are so inundated with choice today. We have far more choices today than previous generations did. We can choose which school we'll go to, not just the neighborhood one, we can choose what hobbies or extracurriculars we or our kids will be involved in. We can choose what friends we want, what interests we have, our career, our spouse, where we wanna live, I mean, we are inundated with choice today. And every choice we make ultimately brings this haunting, this daunting task of asking the question, did I make the right choice? Did I make the choice that is the best one? Or maybe even the choice to maximize my happiness, did I miss out on a better life or another form of happiness because of the choices I made?

And see, I think that's one way we can look at the culture and ask the question, well, how does the gospel answer this? What's the gospel connection? I think Paul even gives us one. He says, we serve a God who's not made by human hands, but he determines and allots our boundaries, where we live, what we do. And if we have a God that makes himself known and is good, we can trust that the choices we've made up until this moment are for our best, even if they're not the ones that we think are for our best. See, there's a little gospel connections we can use through the culture to lead the culture to Christ. Gospel connections can also be made through something that I was taught to think of as gospel nuggets. This is a phrase that when I lived in East Asia on missions, my team leader used to use. What are the gospel nuggets? Little nuggets we can drop. I know that sounds a little weird saying it that way, I just realized, but gospel nuggets that we can drop so that when we say them, they cause people to think, oh, that's interesting, that's not normal. What does that mean? It's a way to evangelize that's not so in your face or a upfront Jesus juke, but a natural way to drop and thread some of our values in Christ in the conversation.

Paul did this. Two times in this engaging in Athens, he mentions the resurrection. In both times, the philosophers are confused. You look at verse 18 of chapter 17. Some of the Epicureans and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him and some said, what does this babblers wish to say? Others said he seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection. And then at the end, when he mentions that God would raise this man from the dead in verse 32, when they heard of the resurrection, some mocked, but others said, we'll hear you more about this. Now, why would the resurrection cause people to mock him and be confused? Well, there's a number of reasons scholars think. One is just simply that these types of philosophers Epicureans and Stoics didn't believe in a resurrection. It was a completely foreign concept. And so to talk about a resurrection, even that word itself could have been foreign to them.

I think there's another way, another reason people think is because when mentioned with Jesus, this foreign divinity, that term for resurrection, anastasis, is a feminine noun. And so maybe people were confusing this with Jesus and his consorts, Jesus, Jesus and Anastasis, these foreign divinities, plural. Whatever it was though, Paul knew that it would do something to cause him to question what he was saying. It would pique their curiosity. And I think we can, my team leader used to say, we need to have some of these gospel nuggets prepared so that when common topics of conversation come in, we can drop them in a way that lead to further conversation. When I was living in East Asia, I was a young single guy. And so inevitably with my peers and college students I was working with, the question of dating almost always came up. And they would always ask me this question, well, who are you looking for in a spouse? Who are you looking for in a girl you wanna date?

And so thinking about these gospel nuggets, I thought, well, okay, I could give the shallow answer, but I would often just say, I'm looking for someone that loves God. Most of them, sometimes they wouldn't think anything of it. They'd just be like, oh, wow, you're so thoughtful. I just want someone who's pretty. But every now and then someone would stop and say, huh, which God? Or like, what do you mean by that? And it would lead to further conversations. I think these are things we can do to just think about, have in our pocket, back pocket with normal conversation that can lead to meaningful follow-up.

Evangelizing conversationally and with gospel connections and gospel nuggets, I think can lead us to evangelize in a way that ultimately does address the hearts of our hearers, which leads us to the last points. How can we evangelize contextually? If conversation and connections are this door opening to evangelism, when we eventually get the chance to speak the gospel and we should, how do we do so in a way that's both understandable to our hearers and relatable to

them? That's what contextual means, understandable and relatable. I think a lot of people, they do want to evangelize. I think a lot of you do want to know how to better be evangelists. But the question is often, well, how do we actually share it in a way that would make some sense to people here, not just stir up controversy? And I think better than just trying to get a presentation right, packaged presentations are fine. Pastor Ben mentioned the three ways or the three circles as a way to think about these hooks to hang our hats on. I think those are helpful. But rather than just thinking, how can I get the presentation right? To evangelize contextually is ask the question, how can I speak it in such a way that would lovingly meet this person's needs? And so the far better way to think about our evangelism is to think about how do the multifaceted aspects of the needs and the heart of this person.

Again, John Nevias mentioned this to us in that same manual for evangelists. He says, how can you expect to evangelize all these varied people with their different perspectives and thought forms through employing but one method of evangelism? Indeed, no one method will suffice. Therefore, when we seek to do the work of evangelism, we must take note of the situation and particular context in which we find each separate people and adapt a method which will suit the particular opportunity they represent. Nevias was actually kind of against the package gospel presentation because he was so for the conversational method that he believed there's a multitude of methods and ways we should think about speaking of the gospel. And so how can we actually do that in our 21st century post-Christian worlds?

You know, something that again, Paul models for us, we don't have time to get into all the ways but the way that he talks about God, he doesn't mention the name Jesus, he doesn't give all the gospel but he does address some of the heart longings of the Epicureans and the Stoics. Maybe just something if you wanna try this later, look at Paul's other sermon in Acts 13 when he preaches to Jews in the synagogue and compare it here with Acts 17 and notice how different they are. And that can give us some insight and ideas for how we can do so in a post-Christian culture. But again, for us, what are some ways we can think about this? And we'll kind of end and land the ship here. Again, I'll go back to that question. How do we share the gospel to a culture that doesn't have a universal concept of morality and sin?

You know, in past generations, most people, most generations in a Christendom or post-Christendom society in maybe middle of the 20th century America or even earlier in Europe, most people had some concepts of the Christian God, of sin, of Jesus and of faith. And my favorite missiologist, Stephen Paz, he's a missiologist at Amsterdam, a Dutch reform missiologist. He says that in those previous eras, evangelism was really just helping people connect the dots. That yeah, God is holy and your sin is against the holy God. So we connect the dots from God to sin. But God sent someone by the name of Jesus to deal with the problem of sin. So we connect the dots from sin to faith, a sin to Jesus, and salvation is by faith alone, not by work, so we connect the dot from Jesus to faith. He says that it was just as simple as that. But then he goes on to say in a post-Christian culture, we're even mentioning the name God brings up questions. Which God? Who is God? I don't believe in God. Mentioning sin has no sticking power because people don't think they're sinners. So why would they need a Jesus that saves? And faith is reduced to just a spiritual practice or posture. How do you actually do that?

I think Paul again gives us a method. He actually talks about sin without even using the concept or the word for sin that we're familiar with. In verse 30, if you look at verse 30, he set up this whole idea that God is the one that who's created us. God is the one that determines our allotments and boundaries. And then in verse 30, he says, "The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now He commands all people everywhere to repent." Doesn't mention how we repent. He doesn't mention that we repent through Savior but he mentions this concept of sin. That there is a God who made Himself known, who created us, to whom we, who deserves all our praise and will no longer overlook our ignorance. See, he uses the culture's terms and concepts to set up this idea of morality. And as much as I think people today say that we're in this hyper individualistic, hyper high autonomy culture, there is no agreed upon morality. I think there actually is. It's just a little bit different than what we're used to seeing. See, morality today is not based on some uniform moral law or written moral code.

Morality today is much more based upon some shared social agreement or virtues or values. They just show up different based on which tribe you're in. And often they're split politically. You know, if you think about cancel culture and social media, that's a way to uphold morality and guard the belonging to the group and cut people off if they transgress the values or virtues of the group. The left determines morality based on views on race, sex, and gender. Whereas the right bases morality on religion, freedom of rights, and capitalistic assumptions. See, there's this agreed upon social contractor

code that you have to uphold to belong to the group. That's morality. It's just a morality that's not really like the guilt and innocence paradigm we're used to in the West of illegal morality. It's actually much more akin to an Eastern morality based on the honor shame of one standing being part of the group. I think this is where we can actually learn from Eastern cultures today. And the way they think about morality, it's much more akin to what morality is today.

Because morality today, you can be blameless according to a law, but you can still be cut and cast out by those social codes. It's one of the reasons why growing up Asian, if you're Asian and here, Asian students often fear getting bad grades. You can do everything right, you can study hard, but if you don't get that A for the label Asian, you're deemed as lesser in your culture. You're not as honorable, you're shamed. You can have everything right, but if you do something wrong by the societies or groups or relational categories that are wrong, then you are no longer blameless. And I think we can evangelize our post-Christian culture today by thinking of some categories of this. The Bible's rife with these examples. You get it in the parable of the prodigal son. Of the son who walks back in shame, and yet the father runs to him, shaming himself by lifting up his dress, his garments, and to honor him by giving him the signet ring. We can even think about with just the pure gospel, how do we speak it into that our society is really longing for acceptance, for belonging.

And instead of constantly living in fear of what people around us will think or whether they'll accept us or not, we have a God who is the high king in honor, sees into all of the depths of our souls, and continues to reach out his arm of acceptance and belonging into his kingdom, regardless of what we do. We have a God that welcomes us by the honor of Christ that's bestowed upon us, who no longer casts us out, but calls us his sons and daughters. And God now looks at us with a loving acceptance of a father. You know, the more we do this, I know it seems like a lot of work, but I think it's worth the work and the efforts. I think it's much easier again to just say I wanna package gospel that can easily just share on the muni, share with random strangers, but think of the labor of love it takes to evangelize contextually. Think of the effort that goes into really being curious enough to converse and spend time with someone, to know them, to know what cultural connections, what cultural messages they're listening to, and then to really wrestle with the pages of Scripture and the gospel, well, how does the gospel speak into that? That's a labor of love, and I think it's a labor of love that mirrors the labor of love that our God did for us in Christ. Because think about what God did in Jesus.

Jesus came contextually as a first century Jew, lived in their Jewish culture, gave parables to speak of the kingdom of God and language they understood. He suffered as the Passover lamb, but not only that, he died on a Roman cross, so that when his heralds, his apostles, traveled the Greco-Roman world, they could speak a gospel of a man that died in such a severe way that the whole known world would have known. So that Jew and Gentile would know Jesus as their savior in a way that draws near to them in their own cultural language and garb, so that all who know him can have a relationship with him.