

The Pastor as... Evangelist

Pastor Joe Boot

Pastor Joe Boot is an apologist, educator, author and pastor. His undergraduate work was in theology at Birmingham Christian College in England and his post-graduate research is in Missiology with the University of Manchester. He served with Ravi Zacharias for seven years as an apologist in the U.K and Canada working for five years as Canadian director of RZIM and continues to serve as an adjunct apologist.

He has spoken all over the world in over 20 countries in numerous universities, seminaries, churches, colleges and conferences, including Eton College Windsor, Oxford University, University of Toronto, University of Waterloo, London School of theology, Virginia Tech, Forman University in Lahore, Pakistan and has publicly debated leading atheists in North American universities.

His apologetic works include *Searching for Truth*, *Why I Still Believe* and *How Then Shall We Answer*, which have been published in Europe and North America. He is visiting lecturer at the Oxford Centre for Christian apologetics at Wycliffe Hall, Oxford, England and is a contributing author to the major apologetics volume *Beyond Opinion*.

He lives in Toronto with his wife Jenny and three children Naomi, Hannah and Isaac where he is pastoring Westminster Chapel and launching the Ezra Institute for Contemporary Christianity.

As for you, always be steady, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry.

– 2 Timothy 4:5

As for Phillip, an angel of the Lord said to him, "Go south down the desert road that runs from Jerusalem to Gaza." So he did, and he met the treasurer of Ethiopia, a eunuch of great authority under the queen of Ethiopia. The eunuch had gone to Jerusalem to worship, and he was now returning. Seated in his carriage, he was reading aloud from the book of the Prophet Isaiah. The Holy Spirit said to Phillip, "Go over and walk along beside the carriage." Phillip ran over and heard the man reading from the prophet Isaiah; so he asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" The man replied, "How can I, when there is no-one to instruct me?" And he begged Phillip to come up into the carriage and sit with him. The passage of Scripture he had been reading was this: "He was led as a sheep to the slaughter. And as a lamb is silent before the shearers, he did not open his mouth. He was humiliated and received no justice. Who can

speak of his descendents? For his life was taken from the earth." The eunuch asked Phillip, "Was Isaiah talking about himself or someone else?" So Phillip began with this same Scripture and then used many others to tell him the good news about Jesus.

– Acts 8:26-35

Defining Evangelism & Apologetics

Paul commands Timothy to do the work of an *evangelist* as he fulfils his ministry. Even if we do not believe we are called to the "office" of the evangelist (Eph. 4), we carry the same mandate and are required to do the work of making known the gospel to non-believers as pastors and teachers.

Evangelism has been subject to a number of definitions. In the narrow sense it means sharing the good news, in the broader sense, the evangelistic mandate is holistic.

Evangelism and the Kingdom of God

Evangelism, by its etymology, centres upon the propagation of the evangel, the 'good news' that was manifest in the person of Jesus Christ. Our English word 'gospel'

literally means 'good news.' Crucially, Jesus' own message in the synoptic gospels was called 'the gospel of the kingdom' (Matthew 4:23). This terminology is scattered liberally throughout the New Testament (Matthew 9:35, Luke: 4:43, Mark 1:15, John 3:3). Clearly then, at the outset, the concept of the *kingdom* is central to our understanding of evangelism.¹ A kingdom requires a king with a sceptre, law and realm, and so Jesus' announcement that the kingdom is here, that it is come near and that it is now advancing in the world is also a declaration that the *reign of God*, our sovereign, has broken into the world visibly.

Jesus' earthly ministry further demonstrated that this good news was not merely a piece of abstract information to be communicated, but it also involved a concrete manifestation. The kingdom coming near meant, according to our Isaiah, *forgiveness of sin, destruction of wickedness, end of enslavement, deliverance for the oppressed, the healing of the sick, the freeing of the demon-possessed, care and concern for the materially and physically poor, the oppressed and the outcast, clothing the naked, refreshing the afflicted, lies replaced with truth, just courts, breaking of violence, reduction of crime, life and peace, returning to God, manifest glory of God in the lives of the people, his Spirit and his word present in our mouths, the enduring of the promise to our children's children* (Is 58-59). It even meant the breaking down of old social barriers between Jew and Gentile signalling the end of alienation and division within the human family (John 4: 7-27). Not only was the good news of the kingdom an announce-

ment of the reign of a just and merciful God, it was also a declaration of victory over the world and all its sin, evil and injustice. To all who feel worn down by sin or suffering, by trial or tribulation, Christ proclaims the victory of his kingdom as a source of new hope, '*take courage; I have overcome the world*' (John 16: 33). The *evangel* declares and demonstrates that this eschatological hope is not just a future hope, but also a present reality. In

Not only was the good news of the kingdom an announcement of the reign of a just and merciful God, it was also a declaration of victory over the world and all its sin, evil and injustice.

noting the movement from the messianic ministry of Jesus to eschatological fulfilment in the Christian community, Walter Klaiber points out how the church is to carry on this mission:

It lives this mission in its service to the sick, the helpless, the captive and the needy... Evangelism befitting the

gospel is evangelism in service of the invitation. It relieves those of whom too much is demanded. It liberates the captive. It heals the sick and worn down and gives new courage to those who have failed. But it does that not on its own authority, but rather in the name of Jesus. "Naming the name" is the most important function of evangelism in the context of the integral mission of the church.²

'Naming the name' by proclaiming Christ's Lordship, extending the gospel invitation and continuing Jesus ministry by bringing freedom, deliverance, hope and liberty in a world dominated by sin

¹ R. Bowen, *So I Send You: A Study Guide to Mission*, (London: SPCK, 1996), p. 60-62

² W. Klaiber, *Call and Response: Biblical Foundations of a Theology of Evangelism*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), p. 48

is thus the essence of evangelism. *Biblical categories can distinguish, but do not artificially separate the physical and the spiritual, the inner and outer life.* Christ's rule extends over every aspect of life; our faith is a comprehensive faith. His kingdom rule cannot be confined to inner piety but embraces and brings life in all its fullness as indicated in John 10:10. This being the case, we should expect to see our evangelistic efforts affecting the social and moral character of individuals, families, and society, indicating the presence of the kingdom.

Evangelism, when conceived in terms of the kingdom is thus intimately related to eschatology which is bound up with all Gods activity in history culminating finally in the new heaven and new earth. This meta-narrative enables us to see Christ's mission as the inauguration of a kingdom now within the reach of all those who will repent and believe the gospel. The work of evangelism then, at the very least, is inviting people to respond to the announcement of the kingdom in the terms laid out by the king! In light of this kingdom Abraham writes:

If this vision is correct then there is good news for the world; there is indeed a gospel worth sharing. Moreover, evangelism is an activity of the followers of Jesus that should be rooted and grounded in this dynamic, mysterious, numinous reality of the rule of God in history.³

In a pluralistic world, the sharing of the gospel also means that it needs to be intelligible to our hearers and defended against objections and competing claimants. When the apostles did the work of the evangelist

³ W.J. Abraham, *The Logic of Evangelism*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1989), p. 39

they did not separate evangelism and apologetics – they were one task. When we defend the gospel we proclaim it and what we proclaim it, we defend it. Many people today consider apologetics to be a purely academic discipline, the relevance of which is confined to a few intellectuals, bearing little relevance to the task of evangelism. However, this is clearly a misunderstanding - the task of giving a reasoned defence of the gospel as it is shared is evidently a mandate given to the whole church, not to an elite few.

The work of evangelism then, at the very least, is inviting people to respond to the announcement of the kingdom in the terms laid out by the king!

“But set apart the Messiah as Lord in your hearts, and always be ready to give a defence to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you. However, do

this with gentleness and respect, keeping your conscience clear, so that when you are accused, those who denounce your Christian life will be put to shame.” [1 Peter 3 v 15 HCSB]

We are each called to prepare ourselves to offer a justification of the Christian view of life to those in our sphere of influence to the best of our ability and to the extent of our current understanding that we should always be seeking to expand – we are commissioned to give a reason for the hope that is ‘in us’. The apostle Jude reminds us:

“Dearly loved friends, I had been eagerly planning to write to you about the salvation we all share. But now I find that I must write about something else, urging you to defend the truth of the Good

News. God gave this unchanging truth once for all time to his holy people.” [Jude 3]

Surrendering to Christ’s Lordship completely – including our intellectual lives – we ‘ready ourselves’, we literally ‘get fit’, to give a rational defence to those who voice objections or are seeking reasons to believe. In our time and in our city, this is critical to fulfilling our ministry and doing the work of the evangelist. We distinguish the faith from all forms of baseless superstition for which a ‘reason’ [logical argument] cannot be given and demonstrate why we have this hope. This task, scripture insists, is given to us all and is central to the task of evangelizing the lost. As Tim Keller has recently noted, our major cities today are the closest we have been in 1,500 years of Western history, to the calling of the early church, in a pluralistic context, to defend the faith, fulfilling the work of the evangelist (see Acts 17).

The Function of Scripture

The only individual actually named in scripture as an “evangelist” was Phillip. We have read from Acts 8 and will return to that passage and its lessons for us shortly. Before we do, let us consider the role of scripture in our task of evangelism.

The Scriptures are foundational for our evangelism / apologetics (terms which I will now use synonymously). The Scriptures, taken as a whole, are clearly a missional document. They are concerned with communicating God’s activity in history, especially his plan of reconciliation and redemption since the fall of humankind

into sin. *These Scriptures tell us who we are, what this world is, why the world is as it is, and what God has done to restore it. It presents us, in other words, with a paradigm with which we are to understand all of life.* The intent of Scripture is not simply to give us information about this world and about ourselves, but to call us to repentance and to completely reorient every aspect of life and thought towards God.

The *missiological* orientation of Scripture means, in an important sense, that Scripture is also an evangelistic / apologetic document.

Through the mouths of the prophets, priests, kings, apostles, and the Son of God himself, we hear the voice of God: that voice justifies the ways of the almighty and condemns the sin of humanity.

Through the mouths of the prophets, priests, kings, apostles, and the Son of God himself, we hear the voice of God – that voice justifies the ways of the almighty and condemns the sin of humankind. This voice reasons with us [Gen 4 v 3-12], calls

us [Rev 22 v 17], tries to persuade us [Isaiah 1 v 18-20], cross-examines us [Job 40 v 1-24], appeals to us [Duet 30 v 19-20] and warns us [Rev 22 v 12-15 & 18-20] – just as we are to do with others in the task of evangelism. Of course, God does not ‘support’ his authoritative claims by appeal to human thinking and expertise as we so often do. Rather, he speaks on his own authority as the self-attesting, self-contained and self sufficient triune, Creator God. As a consequence, it is true that there are no rationalistic arguments from ‘bare facts of nature’ for God’s existence, or appeals to human authorities and ‘experts’ in the pages of the Scriptures. Brilliant 17th Century Christian apologist, scientist and thinker Blaise Pascal writes:

It is a remarkable fact that no writer *within the canon* has ever used nature to prove the existence of God. They all try to help people believe in him. Neither David, nor Solomon, nor others ever said: “There is no such thing as a vacuum, therefore God exists.” They must have been smarter than the smartest of their successors, all of whom have used proofs from nature. This is most significant.⁴

However, there are many other kinds of arguments, persuasions, justifications and admonishments to belief in scripture. For example, in Romans 1 the apostle Paul simply asserts that the testimony of God in the created order, including the human consciousness, is sufficiently evident that men and women are left *without excuse* for not believing in God; no further proof is necessary.

The writer of Hebrews exhorts us concerning the necessity of faith [accepting the authority of Christ] as preceding true knowledge and understanding, “*Anyone who wants to come to him must believe that there is a God and that he rewards those who sincerely seek him*” [Hebrews 11:6]. Jesus also reminds us “*keep on asking and you will be given what you ask for. Keep on looking, and you will find. Keep on knocking, and the door will be opened. For everyone who asks, receives. Everyone who seeks, finds. And the door is opened to everyone who knocks*” [Matt 7: 7-8]. Again, the apos-

⁴ Blaise Pascal, *The Mind on Fire* [from the works of Blaise Pascal], ed. James M. Houston [Bethany House Publishers, 1997], pg., 152

tle Paul, when reasoning with the philosophers in Athens in Acts 17, takes their common conception of an ‘unknown creator God’ [an example of human blindness due to sin and suppression of truth] as the ultimate source of all things, and offers what resembles a form of ontological argument. He emphasizes the *necessary nature* of the true God in whom we each ‘*live and move and have our being*’, in order to exist at all; he shows by quoting their own poets that it is this God we each have a conception of in our minds and hearts – exposing, as he progresses with his argument, the resulting absurdity of their idolatry and religious ceremonies:

You have been worshipping him without knowing who he is, and now I wish to tell you about him. He is the God who made the world and everything in it. Since he is Lord of heaven and earth, he doesn’t live in man-made temples, and human

hands can’t serve his needs – for he has no needs. He himself gives life and breath to everything, and he satisfies every need there is...for in him we live and move and exist. As one of your own poets says, ‘We are his offspring.’ And since this is true, we shouldn’t think of God as an idol designed by craftsmen from gold or silver or stone [Acts 17:23-25, 28-29].

All this is to say that we begin with God and his word, not some other starting point as we seek to fulfill our ministry. The basis of our gospel is not the philosophy of

What we begin with is the entirety of our system of thought. If you begin with man and his ideas, that is all you end with. If you begin with God and his word, you conclude with God and his word.

men, but the word of God. What we begin with (or our given) is the entirety of our system of thought. If you begin with man and his ideas, that is all you end with. If you begin with God and his word, you conclude with God and his word.

The Necessity for Conversation

Sometimes in our evangelistic efforts, we, as pastors, tend to engage more in *monologue* than in *dialogue*. However, if apologetics is to be fruitful, conversation is crucial. As seen in Paul's ministry [Acts 17 v 16-17], meaningful 'interaction' is often necessary for a successful presentation and defence of the gospel. In human experience few things give us more pleasure than a really good, interesting conversation. When we communicate meaningfully, we are imitating our Creator, who made us in his image: "In the beginning...*God said*" [Genesis 1: 1, 3], and "In the beginning *the Word* already existed" [John 1:1]. It is this same God who 'conversed' with our fathers in the faith as we would with a friend, as exemplified in this remarkable dialog with Abraham concerning the destruction of Sodom:

The Lord remained with Abraham for a while. Abraham approached him and said, "Will you destroy both innocent and guilty alike...should not the judge of all the earth do what is right?" And the Lord replied, "If I find fifty innocent people in Sodom, I will spare the entire city for their sake"... "Suppose only ten are found there?" And the Lord said, "Then, for the sake of the ten, I will not destroy it." The Lord went on his way when he had finished his

conversation with Abraham...
[extracts from, Genesis 18 v 22-33]

In light of the apparently intimidating nature of the evangelistic / apologetic task, it is helpful to see evangelism, as fundamentally, a great *conversation!* It is a conversation going on between human beings in the context of the overarching cosmic conversation - that between God and the creation he loves. Ours is not a distant, passionless God, who simply issues commands from on high, without concern for the thoughts, feelings and freedoms he has granted his people. Remarkably, ours is the living God who genuinely interacts with his creatures, engaging them in two-way conversation. We see this all through the Old Testament among the great saints, from Adam and Eve through David and the prophets. Then, in the New Testament, we read of the master conversationalist, Jesus Christ. Just think of some of his remarkable conversations with Nicodemus the Jewish teacher, the Roman centurions, the Samaritan woman, and with the procurator of Judea, Pontius Pilate, to mention just a few.

When we communicate meaningfully, we are imitating our Creator, who made us in his image.

Questions, Conversations and Presuppositions

Why is conversation so important in evangelism? As humans we know it is very easy for misunderstandings to arise in our interactions with others. Just think about political discourse! There are various reasons for misunderstandings; cultural, ethical, intellectual, spiritual, and emotional, but we all know what it is like to experience them. How often have you misunderstood somebody's intention or meaning and had the misunderstanding cleared up in a later conversation? Sometimes, in our apologetic efforts, we are prone to hastily

expect people to understand our meaning and the content of the gospel purely on the basis of a brief proclamation or assertion. Whilst, oftentimes we are busy answering a question they're not even asking because we have not been careful enough to listen to their questions or to consider what lies beneath them!

Conversations take many different forms according to context. There is no particular script we need to memorize in order to have an apologetic conversation; rather, it is a creative opportunity for interaction. This is not because all views are equally valid, for they most certainly are not, but because through conversation we are able to hear what the person is really saying. As we listen to each other, we can begin to see which views are sound and which are not. The ancient Greek saying, "speak that I may see thee" is a helpful insight at this point.

Critically, conversations help expose our motives, assumptions, presuppositions, and biases. Indeed, they help us see and begin to articulate what we believe and why, sometimes for the first time. From experience, I know that it is often easier to break through barriers of disinterest through conversation than through lecturing. Jesus did this all of the time; he asked over 100 questions of others in the New Testament. Unlike us, Jesus did not need new information from people to overcome ignorance, rather he was helping people to face themselves and recognize their own assumptions and underlying motives.

There are many examples of this. On one occasion he is asked a 'complex question'

about whether taxes should be paid to Caesar or not [Matt 22:15-22]. This question might appear quite straight forward and innocuous on the surface, if the context is not considered. The Jewish people were once again under the rule of a foreign power – this time Rome. The Roman imperial authority taxed the people which the Jews greatly resented; hence tax collectors who appear so often in the New Testament were despised by their fellow Jews. At the same time, not to pay your taxes was a serious offence against the emperor

and to encourage others not to pay tribute was treasonous activity; a false charge which was levelled at Jesus by the Jewish authority when dragged before the Roman governor.

Jesus knew then that the questioners were simply trying to trap him and so

rather than falling into their pit he exposed their evil motives: "You hypocrites!" he said. "Whom are you trying to fool with your trick questions? Here, show me the Roman coin used for the tax" [vv 18-19]. If at this point he had said, "Yes, pay up," he would have been accused of being 'pro Roman' and a traitor to the people of Israel, supporting their subjugation and so consequently could not possibly be the 'Christ' of Israel, the deliverer. On the other hand if he had said, "No, do not pay the tax," in their hypocrisy, they would have had legitimate ground for accusing him of sedition before the Roman authorities. Consequently, Jesus requesting a Roman coin and asks a famous question of his own, "Whose picture and stamp is on it?" "Caesar's" they replied. "Well, then," he said, "Give to Caesar what belongs to him. But every-

Unlike us, Jesus did not need new information from people to overcome ignorance, rather he was helping people to face themselves and recognize their own assumptions and underlying motives.

thing that belongs to God must be given to God." The Scripture records that, 'His reply amazed them and they went away' [vv 19-22].

My former colleague Ravi Zacharias often says that if they had been wise they would have asked the next obvious question, "What belongs to God?" He says our Lord's answer might have come, "whose image is on you?"

Jesus then, amazed the questioner with the wisdom of his response, by asking the right question and exposing the hidden motive and bias. In a similar incident, in front of a large crowd, he is asked about the authority upon which he is saying and doing the things he does by the Jewish priests and legal experts [Matt 21:23ff], "Who gave you such authority?" they retort. Again, sensing the questioners' motives were wrong, Jesus answers the question with a question. "I'll tell you who gave me the authority to do these things if you answer one question...Did John's baptism come from heaven or was it merely human?" This brilliant rhetorical strategy turned the tables completely. They had set a trap for Jesus. If he had answered in a straight forward manner simply saying that he had cleansed the temple in *Gods authority* they would have accused him of blasphemy in the house of God, by claiming equality with the almighty. They would then have sought to kill him by rousing the crowd into an angry mob to stone him [something they sought to do on many occasions]. Alternatively, if he had said, "I did it on my own authority," they would simply have asked why anyone should bother listening to or obeying his word if it were merely human.

The key to persuasive apologetic preaching and conversation is understanding the lenses through which we all look at the world.

The reason Jesus response is so brilliant is clearly revealed in the account itself, as the Jewish leaders talk over his question amongst themselves, "If we say it was from heaven [John's Baptism], he will ask why we didn't believe him. But if we say it was merely human, we'll be mobbed, because the people think he was a prophet." So finally to escape their dilemma they replied, "We don't know." Jesus response in answer to this brings a smile to my face every time I read it, "*Then I won't answer your question either.*"

Their bias and motives had been exposed by an incisive question – that is apologetics! Conversations need questions and we must learn to ask the right questions with wisdom at the right time.

Paradigms and Points of View

In any evangelistic conversation, the worldview of those involved will determine the nature of the conversation and the way individual issues are approached. Sometimes, because the question of *worldview* is not raised explicitly in the conversation, we can forget how important it is. However, if we do not understand the presuppositions that we all bring to the conversation (whether we are preaching or talking with a friend), we will be frustrated and might feel that we are simply banging our heads against a brick wall. The key to persuasive apologetic *preaching and conversation* is understanding the lenses through which we all look at the world. By first looking at the world as the non-believer and speaking to how he conceives of it, we seek to show how their view destroys the intelligibility of our everyday human experience; we help them to see that their view lacks adequate foundation,

making no sense of, nor accounting for, the most important aspects of life.

Next, our task is to give him or her the spectacles of Scripture to look through – to look at reality in Jesus Christ and show how this alone makes sense of our life and loves – adequately describing and accounting for the fundamental character of our existence.

The best sermons and conversations will probe the real issues that often lie beneath the faith assertions or questions of others. *What we should be listening for is the question that lies beneath the question since, more often than not, a deeper more*

fundamental question underpins popular objections. When the real question has been fully understood, the assumptions and pre-suppositions of the questioner become clearer. Since all questions arise out of the worldview of the questioner, questions will often reveal the *point of conflict* between the questioner's worldview and the worldview they are being presented with. At this point, the conversation often reaches a turning point. There is no neutrality with respect to God, so a response of some kind to this alternative worldview is inevitable. Those who conversed with Jesus in the Gospels usually responded in one of three ways. Either they accepted his word joyfully and followed him [Matt 4:18 -23], went way dejected [as the rich man did in Mark 10:17-30], or they reacted with great hostility, even to the point of trying to kill him [Matt 12:14].

Scripture teaches that sinners are hostile to God and they suppress the truth in unrighteousness [Romans 1:18 – 21]. Con-

versations can either progress meaningfully or they can go down endless rabbit trails leading nowhere, depending on the heart condition of those participating in the conversation. Thankfully, we are simply called to be faithful, and someone's final response to faithful evangelism is in the Father's hands and not ours.

Answering Objections

As important as good scholarship and careful investigation of evidences are for evangelism [this should never be minimized or undervalued] our focus should not be frantic at-

In the Gospels people usually responded to Jesus in one of three ways: Either they accepted his word joyfully and followed him, went away dejected, or they reacted with great hostility, even to the point of trying to kill him.

tempts to gather vast arrays of evidences from numerous sources to pour all over the inquirer in hope of tipping the balance in our favour; such an approach makes one feel that life must be spent perfecting a kind of Christian intellectual Ninjitsu, where we always have to find a counter move to beat the opponent – always one step ahead. I was speaking in California last year and a young man asked me how long I had been an “apolo-jedi” (which I found very funny, but indicative of the misunderstanding). Rather we should first help the sceptic face himself and his failing worldview that cannot account for the contradictions of his nature and thinking, and then show him the resources of seeing all things in Christ. We can then show how many evidences are very compelling when seen in light of the Christ, especially biblical prophecy and miracles.

If we do not pre-suppose a transcendent referent [Christ and biblical revelation] beyond our finite minds, there is no way to verify truth as a correspondence

with reality, since we do not know, or at least have no final consensus about, what reality is; indeed that is the heart of the question! Tests for coherence only examine the ‘validity’ of conclusions and whether premises comport [very important], but cannot tell us about the soundness of premises. And the ‘practical success’ [pragmatism] of a worldview pre-supposes a pre-established goal [how do we know if something has ‘worked’ successfully without knowing what we are trying to accomplish] or criterion for success leading us to truth – but clearly that pre-supposes we will know when we have arrived at truth, the very thing we are seeking to test for! Equally, tests of empirical adequacy pre-suppose a given interpretation of the ‘empirical data’ and so cannot be paradigm neutral.

However, with Christ as our final referent, then all that corresponds to his mind revealed in scripture corresponds to reality he has made. Coherence is not ultimately found in arbitrary human philosophies either, the internal antinomies of non-Christian worldviews are not difficult to expose. Coherence is only found finally in Christ, in whom and through whom all things cohere. God is exhaustively rational—there is no contradiction in him. If there were, then all ‘rational’ thought would be meaningless. Finally, all that is *true* will also give us success pragmatically [not the other way round] and is supported by empirical data biblically interpreted, since God governs everything in this world and works things out according to his plan. Christ and his revelation become then a necessary precondition of knowing and testing truth. Only in Christ who is ‘the truth’ does truth have a sure foundation. Pascal insightfully guides us in defending the gospel when he writes:

Not only is it impossible to know
God without Christ, but it is use-

less also... I marvel at the audacity with which some people presume to speak of God. In giving their evidence to unbelievers, usually their first chapter is to prove the existence of God from the works of nature. I would not be surprised about this project if they were addressing their arguments to believers, for those with living faith in their hearts can clearly see at once that everything that exists is entirely the work of God whom they worship. But for those in whom this light has been extinguished and in whom we are trying to rekindle it – such people see...only obscurity and darkness.⁵

Pascal goes on to say that one might try to argue with a non-believer the case for God from, for example, the regular course of the moon and planets, but in terms of how they will view such evidence, without the light of faith he says,

If such an argument were to be presented to them, no wonder they would react and say that the proofs or our religion are feeble indeed, and reason and expedience tell me that nothing is more likely to bring it into contempt in their sight. But this is not how scripture speaks, with its better knowledge of the things of God. On the contrary it speaks of God as a hidden God, and because nature has been corrupted, he has left men to their blindness. They can only escape from this through Jesus Christ, for without him, all communication with God is severed.⁶

Thus, it is of vital importance to understand first the presuppositions or the para-

⁵ Ibid., pg, 151

⁶ Ibid., pg, 152

digm that governs people's thought. *What we believe about different issues depends on the medium through which we see the world*; this medium [story] will govern which arguments are regarded as persuasive or not and how 'evidence' will be interpreted. Furthermore, as Pascal highlights above, that larger perspective is also influenced by factors that are often underestimated, such as our fallenness, blindness and ethical hostility toward God. Consider the words of evolutionary biologist and open despiser of Christianity, Richard Dawkins, as he expounds his blind faith that wilfully resists any conclusion of design:

...all of life on this planet is shaped by Darwinian natural selection, which also endows it with an *overwhelming illusion* of "design." I believe but cannot prove that...all intelligence, all creativity, and all design, anywhere in the universe, is the direct or indirect product of a cumulative process equivalent to what we here call Darwinian natural selection. It follows that design comes late in the universe, after a period of Darwinian evolution. Design cannot precede evolution and therefore cannot underlie the universe [emphasis mine].⁷

Even though grudgingly admitting [just barely] that he cannot prove that design 'cannot' precede evolution and 'cannot' underlie the universe, he is fanatically committed to his religious presupposition to the point that blatant evidence of design is interpreted as an 'overwhelming illusion'. Nonetheless, recognizing and showing that we all speak on behalf of a particular worldview is not enough. We cannot be satisfied with just an abstract analysis of people's presuppositions, since

⁷ Richard Dawkins cited in, *What We Believe But Cannot Prove*, edited by John Brockman [Harper Perennial 2006], pg., 9

the God we are seeking to introduce to people is not theoretical, but is the living God of Scripture. At the foundation of all true understanding is *conversion, a moral, spiritual and intellectual transformation*; we are not saved by argument or reason, but by faith. In order for us humans to see the world rightly, we need new birth. God wants to use us as instruments in his great work of regeneration, not merely to 'win arguments' or gloat over embarrassing our opponents; but to win people to inclusion in the hospitality of the City of God.

The Condition of our Hearers

Since humans have suppressed the truth in their rebellion against God, their eyes are now covered with spiritual cataracts. Humans are lost and alienated from God, and they cannot find appropriate ways of knowing truth simply through reason while disconnected from God and his revealed word. After all, reason does not supply premises; it only works on premises that are already given. People are caught in a dialectical tension—they are thinkers and they know that they must think correctly. Yet, without God, the search for truth proves futile and the quest for happiness is frustrated.

Long before the French existentialists, the writer of Ecclesiastes identified the vanity of life lived without reference to God:

"Everything is meaningless," says the teacher, "utterly meaningless!" What do people get for all their hard work? Generations come and go, but nothing really changes. The sun rises and sets and hurries around to rise again... the rivers run to the sea but the sea is never full...everything is so weary and tiresome! No matter how much we see, we are never satisfied. No matter how much we hear we are not

content...everything under the sun is meaningless, like chasing the wind. [Eccl 1:2ff]

However, faith in the God of creation resolves the human dilemma. The dialectical tension is gone, because God's revelation supplies true premises by which the world and everything in it becomes intelligible. This faith goes beyond the limits of autonomous human reasoning. It sees, describes, and accounts for the human condition as no other view can; *it shows what must be true in order for things to be what they appear to be!*

As we evangelize and defend the faith, our objective is to show that without Christ all things are reduced to absurdity and vanity. Noted atheist, Frederick Nietzsche was a self-conscious hater of Christ and, in the end, of humankind. He was at least an honest opponent of the God of Scripture, and he readily saw the logical end of what life would mean without God. Proclaiming himself the antichrist and heralding the era of the superman he claimed to see the abyss with pride. He sought to project himself as the 'superman' who was beyond all faiths and all 'illusions'. The end result of the death of God in human thinking, for Nietzsche, was the destruction of a 'true world' – a human fiction. He wrote:

"Our first principles: no God: no purpose."⁸

Nietzsche in open contempt for Christ wrote:

"Man must become better and eviler" – so do I teach. The evilest is necessary for the superman's best. It may have been well for the preacher of the petty people to suffer and be burdened by men's sin. I, how-

⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, cited by R. J. Rushdoony, 'The Death of Meaning', [Ross House Books, 2002], pg., 124

ever, rejoice in great sin as my great consolation.⁹

He also writes:

The very last thing I should promise to accomplish would be to "improve" mankind. I set up no new idols; I only want old idols to learn what it means to have feet of clay. To overthrow idols [the name I give to ideals] is very much more like my business.¹⁰

Our objective is to show that without Christ all things are reduced to absurdity and vanity.

For him the great ideals of the Christian faith [amongst other ideas] are illusions so he relentlessly attacks the idea of hope in or beyond history. His creed is war on all things. In fact he predicted, "wars, whose like have

never been seen on earth before. Politics on a grand scale will date from me."¹¹ The 20th century seems to bear out his prediction, precipitated as WWII was, in part, by his thought. Without God the futility and absurdity of human existence leaves us at the mercy of this kind of devilry – a true nihilism which makes people sick of the sight of other people – man becoming the absolute assassin of man. The 'superman' who tries to move beyond Christ, as his own god, does not love nor liberate, but hates and despises his fellow man regardless of whether he masquerades as pity, charity or the redemptive, humanitarian equalitarian state.

By contrast the great man of faith, Pascal, saw that the living God was no fiction, that he was the Creator of heaven and earth, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the One in whom all things consist.

⁹ Ibid., pg 123

¹⁰ Ibid., pg 123

¹¹ Ibid., pg 124

He recognized that human beings are neither 'supermen' [capable of transcending all faiths] nor gods, but slaves to their own vanity, pride and selfishness. Therefore, those seeking to live without Christ and his redemption were inescapably reduced to vanity. Both men reached the same conclusion—life without God leads to the death of meaning, law, objective morality, and 'true' philosophy, only evil can reign where Christ is despised. Nietzsche was a vain moral rebel and was blinded by hate with respect to Christ the Son, while Pascal was a servant of Christ and saw that all meaning, happiness and virtue was found in him; he clearly exposes the result of Nietzsche's negation of Christ two hundred years before this pitiable man was ever born:

Without Christ man can only be sinful and wretched. With Christ man is freed from sin and wretchedness. For in him is all our virtue and happiness. Apart from him there can only be vice, wretchedness, error, darkness, death and despair...apart from Jesus Christ we cannot know the meaning of our life or of our death, of God or of ourselves. Without scripture, whose only object is to proclaim Christ, we know nothing, and we can see nothing but obscurity and confusion...¹²

Kingdom Upside Down

It should now be clear that at the heart of evangelism and every conversation about faith, there is a clash of paradigms. Regardless of whether they have thought through this or not, a Christian is presupposing a Biblical paradigm [ultimate story] and the unbeliever is presupposing one of a number of paradigms that do not include the God of the Bible. The Christian rests the

ultimate criterion for truth in the Creator God of Scripture; the other person does not. So, when discussing some aspect of faith, philosophy or ethics, whether abortion, sexuality, science, or the resurrection, it is important to recognize that what people will accept as fact is dependent upon their religious pre-commitment. Often, data that does not conform to their pre-commitment will not be accepted even if it is accompanied by what we consider powerful evidence. This is because the evidence itself must be interpreted in accordance with their paradigm which still needs the light of Christ to shine into their darkness.

I will never forget the time when I was delivering a series of apologetic addresses on the Christian faith in London England. I was in the sixth and final session speaking about the resurrection of Christ. The talk seemed to go very well. At the end, before we were to break into discussion groups one of the sceptics attending the course came to me to ask a question. "That was a great talk," she said. I tried to respond humbly, "Well, thank you very much for your encouragement." "In fact it was a watertight argument," she added, "but I have a question though." "Please go ahead" I urged her, now feeling very pleased with myself and fully expecting her to ask me what she needed to do to become a Christian. But her question caught me completely off guard, "Jesus was raised from the dead! So what? My uncle George might be raised from the dead. This is a chaotic universe in which anything might happen – perhaps I might be raised from the dead, who knows?"

It took me some time to disseminate and realize what the problem was. I had been reading apologetics for quite some time at this point and was accustomed to thinking of historical proofs for the resurrection as overwhelmingly compelling. They certainly are very compelling to those who share a Christian philosophy of

¹² Blaise Pascal, *Mind on Fire*, pg., 153

fact, but for those who hold to the idea of the 'brute fact' (unrelated and uncreated), history is the result of chance, not of a foreordained plan and purpose – thus, no one event can shape or define reality. Even though my argument convinced her that the resurrection probably happened, she dealt with this evidence, not by seeing it as the final proof of Christ's divinity and the truth of the scriptures, but by interpreting it in the light of her worldview – a chance occurrence thrown out of the womb of chance that has no ultimate meaning, for there can be no 'signs' in a history that is random; all events are equally insignificant. By the grace of God, this young woman did come to faith in Christ. Through this experience I learned a valuable lesson about false assumptions in communicating with the non-believer.

We cannot assume that they share our paradigm. They may have a fatally inconsistent 'hybrid' version, or a different one altogether.

Therefore, we must address the questions in our sermons and conversations in our time at the level of paradigm or worldview. This is critical today to doing the work of the evangelist. We can do this by discussing the presuppositions [foundational beliefs] themselves from the point of view of our conversation partner. *From within that paradigm*, we can raise objections and highlight 'internal conflicts' that call the whole paradigm into question. For example, as we have seen, the humanist destroys the basis of objective morality and real knowledge, but at the same time makes 'truth claims' for herself, insisting that she is 'morally justified', freely implying that the Christian view of say, abortion or sexual ethics, is in fact false and

'immoral'. After graciously highlighting internal conflicts in their perspective that undermine and cause it to self-destruct, we can invite the other person to enter our worldview and to look at the world through the lens of Jesus Christ. We help them to see that by trusting Christ and his authority rather than their own or some other personage, their understanding will be opened to see the power of the evidence all around them. St Augustine guides us on the right path when he says:

The mysteries and secrets of the kingdom of God first seek out believing men, that they may make them understand. For faith is understanding's step, and understanding is faith's reward... If an unbeliever asks of me the reason of

my faith and hope...I will give him this reason by which he may possibly understand, namely, how preposterous it is to demand *before believing*, the reason of those things which he cannot understand¹³

Although the mind might be able to comprehend Christian arguments the carnal person cannot properly understand the truth about God.

There is a very important insight here, not just a rhetorical flourish. The apostle Paul reminds us that although the mind might be able to comprehend Christian arguments the carnal person cannot properly understand the truth about God... "People who aren't Christians can't understand these truths from God's Spirit. It all sounds foolish to them because only those who have the Spirit can understand what the Spirit means. We who have the Spirit understand these things, but others can't understand us at all" [1 Cor 2 v 14f]. Augustine points out that

¹³ St Augustine, *An Augustine Synthesis*, [Sheed and Ward – New York, 1945], pg.,52, 54, 62

a person granted a 'degree' of understanding, by grace, in which initial conditions are created conducive to belief, is then made capable of the step of faith. In taking that step of faith "understanding is faith's reward." When the authority of Christ is embraced and all is seen through the lens of Christ's Lordship, we can see things clearly by the Spirit, as a new understanding emerges and the reason and evidences become utterly compelling.

Augustine highlights his approach to the unbeliever noting - as illustrated by my account above of the London sceptic - how futile it is to offer positive reasons or *direct proofs for our faith* to those who are blinded by their erroneous beliefs, for such proofs they cannot possibly understand whilst governed by a false worldview, hostile to the Spirit. So we must first *answer them according to their folly*, showing how their faith falls by its own weight around them. We then trust Christ, the light of the world, who illuminates all men and women at all times to differing degrees, to grant them understanding as we show them Christ! By showing people the world from this point of view, the view of faith in the authority of Christ, and by admonishing people that "anyone who wants to come to him must *believe that there is a God* and that he rewards those who sincerely seek him" [Heb 11 v 6], the Holy Spirit can bring divine correction, so that our message ceases to sound foolish, but rather overwhelmingly persuasive.

Intellectually the argument can be followed, but only by the Spirit can the truth be rightly understood and embraced. Our task then, is to help them reorient their knowledge by seeing all life through the corrective lens which is Christ, so that the

kingdom "upside down" can be seen "right side up".

Christians as Guides (Acts 8:31)

In John 3:12, Jesus is speaking to a religious teacher, Nicodemus, who is confused by Jesus' language of rebirth, "Unless you are born again you can never see the kingdom of God." Jesus says to Nicodemus, "But if you don't even believe when I tell you about things that happen here on earth, how can you possibly believe if I tell you what is going on in heaven" [John 3 v 12]? In other words, if you do not believe the things illustrated with an earthly analogy, how can you believe if I tell you of things beyond this world? In Nicodemus' mind, salvation came by outward obedience to the detailed requirements of all aspects of the Mosaic Law. His pre-suppositions concerning how to be right with God were preventing him from comprehending what Christ was saying to him. But his problem was not merely a lack of knowledge. In verses 19-20, Jesus helps Nicodemus understand the true reason for his lack of comprehension:

We must first answer them according to their folly, showing how their faith falls by its own weight around them.

The light from heaven came into the world, but they loved darkness more than the light, for their actions were evil. They hate the light because they want to sin in the darkness. They stay away from the light for fear their sins will be exposed and they will be punished. But those who do what is right come to the light gladly, so everyone can see that they are doing what God wants.

In self righteousness and self justification Nicodemus had adopted a view that prevented him from seeing the light. Christ challenges his false legalistic assumptions, “unless you are born again...”!

Another conversation in Acts 7 also demonstrates the influence of presuppositions in terms of people’s ability to hear and understand God’s word. Stephen addresses the Jewish council [religious and political authority], including the high priest, and offers a brilliant defence of the faith for those who understood the Jewish worldview. The Jews had long felt that they were right before God because they had the temple that Solomon had built: a place to meet with the only true God. But they had become so myopic in their worldview that they had come to think that the *physical temple* made God their own possession. Understanding this underlying error Stephen points out from the Scripture, “*Heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool, could you ever build me a temple as good as that says the Lord. Could you build a dwelling place for me? Didn’t I make everything in heaven and earth?*” [Acts 7: 49-50]. Stephen points out in verse 51 that their faulty use of scripture leading to a false view of life was rooted in a deeper moral problem - their stiff necks and uncircumcised hearts and ears lying at the root of their blindness. They resist the Holy Spirit in sin and pride and they need to completely reorient their viewpoint in order to be converted! They may have known certain true propositions about God, but there was no saving faith, no love of truth. Stephen was a wise guide, but instead of listening, they stoned God’s servant to death. *We may not be stoned for the gospel, but we can expect at times a violent and intellectually hostile attack against our message.*

In Acts chapter 8, Philip the evangelist is prompted by the Holy Spirit to speak with an Ethiopian eunuch. *God has clearly been preparing this man’s heart*, but he still does not properly understand the Scripture, even though he is a God-fearer who had come to worship the God of Israel in

Jerusalem. Many are like this today; they may have a certain recognition of God, but they do not understand the Scripture and their presuppositions about the way of salvation are usually centred on the notion that it results from some kind of personal moral achievement, a moralistic redemption. In this account, Philip asks whether this inquiring man whether he understands the text. The treasurer of Ethiopia acknowledges his need for a guide, so *Phillip takes the scriptures and preaches Jesus to him*; doubtless bringing colour, depth and context to the man’s understanding of the Biblical story. It would have been fascinating to be a fly on the wall during that bible study! This remarkable conversation is instrumental in the persuasion of this great official and he *requests baptism immediately.*

In Acts Chapters 24-26, Paul converses with King Agrippa and imperial Governor Felix. In the case of Felix, Paul’s reasoned presentation of faith in Christ is set aside by Felix, but it nonetheless terrifies his conscience – the evident reason for his rejection of Paul’s proclamation (Acts 24:25), since he insists Paul leave his presence. Later, Paul has opportunity to give a lengthy defence before Agrippa and the new governor, Festus. Festus, on hearing the message through the intellectual filter of his pagan paradigm, says “*Paul, you are beside yourself! Much learning is driving you mad!!*” Again, the role of worldview is clear; for to him, the gospel is madness. Paul responds, “*I am not mad, most noble Festus, but speak the words of truth and reason.*” Therefore, the conversations of Scripture not only teach us the power of paradigms as obstacles to coming to the knowledge of God and, but also the ***greater power of Christ***, who by grace uses our sermons, arguments and conversations as instruments to bring faith to the heart; the effect of which is clearly seen by those philosophers who responded in faith to

Paul's message on Mars Hill in Acts chapter 17, whilst others who were not recipients of divine enabling scoffed.

Conclusion

As we fulfill our ministry and do this work of the evangelist, the great conversation goes on, through us. It goes on only because God began it and sustains it; he is the very pre-condition of all intelligible

communication. He is the first communicator, the great conversationalist, the eternal Word who spoke all things into being and now calls us to himself to *converse together with him at the family supper table in the house of God, with the saints of old, in the city of the great King!* Let us take this Word to the world in our time and, as pastors, have evangelistic conversations that count for eternity!