

Reaching the Unchurched

Evangelism 101

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This evening, I want to encourage you to open your Bibles to the book of Acts 26 and it is my desire tonight not only as we read from Acts 26 but as we study concepts and principles of sharing our faith otherwise known as evangelism, to give you some encouragement because I think oftentimes when we share the gospel, when we discuss our faith, that for some reason that conjures up within us this idea that somehow that everybody that the Apostle Paul shared with got saved, that everybody the early church shared their testimony with became a convert to Jesus Christ.

As you make your way toward the end of the book of Acts, there are three very strategic conversations that the Apostle Paul has with some very powerful people. There is Festus, Felix and Agrippa, all of which held great positions of authority, all would have been great persons of influence had the Bible recorded their conversion experience. But it is his conversation with King Agrippa in Acts 26 that though I don't like what it says, it gives me comfort in what it says. Verse 27 of Acts 26, this is the Apostle Paul speaking, he says,

27 King Agrippa, believest thou the prophets? I know that thou believest.
28 Then Agrippa said unto Paul, Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian.

Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian.

Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, tonight as we extrapolate from these two verses the principles and truths of what it means to be faithful in the midst of those who have rejected, Lord, I pray tonight that you would equip us, that you would train us, that you would motivate us, that you would put within us a desire to go forth even when our words are rejected, to stay faithful even in the midst of great opposition. Lord, may we be as this passage, may we share the truth, may we testify to the truth even when those around us reject it. It is the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

Tonight, we continue a study if you're new to us, regarding what we know as evangelism. Very simply, it is a study of how do we as believers in Jesus Christ, how do we share our

faith? One of the definitions, my favorite definition of evangelism that we've utilized throughout our time together is that it is one beggar telling another beggar where to find food. Tonight, I want to deal with somewhat the proverbial elephant in the room. How do you and I as believers in Jesus Christ, how do we reach the unchurched? Why would this be the proverbial elephant in the room? Because statistically it doesn't matter if you go to the "sacred sources," the secular sources, even the most positive of sources, there is not a study today that will share with you that over 10% of our culture are evangelical Christians.

Now when I use that term evangelical Christian, do not think in terms of the political world that has somewhat hijacked that statement evangelical. An evangelical Christian is somebody who doesn't just say they're a Christian because of where they live. An evangelical Christian isn't somebody who claims to be a Christian just because they believe that there is a God. An evangelical Christian is an individual who subscribes to the fact that the Bible is true from beginning to end, that Jesus Christ lived, not only came in a very supernatural birth, lived a sinless life, died a sacrificial death, rose again physically victorious over death and is one day coming again, and here's the most strategic part, an evangelical Christian by definition believes that Jesus Christ alone is the satisfactory means whereby one must and can be saved.

Today, there are a lot of people who take the title of Christian or might claim to be one but we actually live in a society today where the overwhelming majority of those who we live life with not only are not believers but also are not "churched." Half a century ago, it wasn't if you went to church, it's which one did you go to. It was a part of our culture that one set aside time in their week to be a part of a worship service. How else do you describe the fact that at the crossroads of most communities in our culture you have a Baptist church, a Methodist church, a Presbyterian church, and on the fourth corner whoever split off of one of the previous three? Why? Because it was a part of who we as a culture were. But today oftentimes in many places, those buildings are being abandoned not as a place of faith but as a place for something else. How do you and I in a world that is primarily lost, in a world that is primarily unchurched, where it is no longer even culturally promoted to be a part, much less attend a church, how do we speak to, how do we reach this lost and dying world in this context?

I want to begin by addressing or describing our culture as it should be. The radically unchurched. Why do I use the phrase "radically unchurched"? Because it's not an unchurched of inconvenience or convenience. It's not an unchurched because I'm just simply busy. It's not just an unchurched because I've got other things to do. We now live in a world where people are rejecting faith and rejecting being a part of a church because they have in their minds valid reasons and arguments not to do so. It's not just that they're silently not attending, they can actually verbalize and vocalize their despising of those of you that do.

So how do we address a radically unchurched culture? Well, I think to be somewhat overly simplistic, I think we have to say that these radically unchurched fall into two very specific groups. Group number 1: there are those that have heard the gospel message and

they have willingly rejected it. It's not that they haven't been exposed to the gospel, they've actually heard the message of Jesus Christ. They may have listened to a sermon, they may have heard a testimony, they may have heard someone in their life sit down and talk to them about what it means to be saved, but they have rejected it. There's a great theologian of years gone by named G. K. Chesterton who made a very profound observation. He said, "If you're going to move a man's fences, you first need to ask why he put them up in the first place." Now when you take that to sharing the gospel, if you have an individual like our culture does, that they've put a fence up, there's a fence in their life that says, "I don't want to hear about Jesus," there's a fence in their life that says, "I don't believe the Bible," there's a fence in their life that says, "Church is for those who are weak. It's not for me." Those are fences that you and I respectively may not embrace but we have to ask the question: why were they erected in the first place?

So what's the response to those who have heard the message and willingly rejected it? It's a volitional response. We must be equipped to address the excuses. It's much like today, a football coach who leads a team into a game that is, shall we say, with an outcome that is not desired, just rejecting going to the press conference because he doesn't want to deal with the pressure, doesn't want to deal with the issues. We would have no place for that. You must address the questions. You must address the issues. You must address the apparent discrepancies, whatever it may be. So for that first group who've heard and willingly reject it, we must respond to the excuses. We'll speak to that in just a moment.

Then there's the second group, the group that may surprise you. There are actually people not just in Western civilization, not just in the United States of America, but even in the "Bible belt" who have never clearly heard. They've never actually heard the message, number 1, that they are a sinful human being. You say, "Well, how could they not hear that?" Because we live in a world today that promotes just the opposite. We live in a world that tells everybody they're just fine the way they are, they don't need anything to change. Do you know what the Bible says? You're not fine the way you are and everything needs to change.

Yet we also live in a culture where oftentimes even in this culture, they've never clearly heard the gospel shared. It surprises me, yet it should not surprise me that on a somewhat regular basis, I hear stories of individuals in our context and culture who make it all the way to their 30s and have never heard the gospel. I think one of the greatest travesties that we have in our world today is that we just presume or, shall I say, assume that if you live in the southern United States, number 1, you grew up in church, number 2, you've heard the gospel. Statistically both may not be true.

So how do we respond to those who've never even heard even in our own context? We must communicate clearly to them because unfortunately, though they've never heard the true gospel, oftentimes they've heard a "false or twisted gospel" that sometimes they think is actually the gospel. And I will confess tonight that of these two groups, that is the rarest of the two. The rarest of the groups are those who have never heard in our context specifically, the most prolific are those who have heard and for whatever reason have decided to erect a fence, put a wall up and said, "I have no need in my life."

So tonight I want to deal with the excuses. How do you deal with somebody, how do you have a conversation with when you share the gospel or you're discussing your faith, that continually brings up arguments, they continually bring up excuses, they continually want to push back with whatever reasoning that they have? I'm going to begin by giving you some guidelines and, by the way, this is strategically for sharing the gospel but allow me to share with you, these guidelines go even beyond evangelism. How do you discuss with somebody who is antagonistic or contrary to the faith about the necessity of the faith?

1. Negotiate not argue. There's a big difference. When you argue with somebody, all you're doing is claiming you're right, they're wrong, and as the argument prolongs all you tend to do is get louder and louder and louder, and eventually you're in a screaming match and both parties depart and neither one has been converted to the other. Negotiation is a very different concept. Negotiation says, "I will hear you if you hear me." Negotiation says, "Allow me to speak and then I will allow you to answer." Negotiation says, "I will allow you to push back but give me time to respond appropriately and courteously." Negotiation is very different than argumentation, yet we see this particularly in our civic world or our civil world, that our negotiations often lead to arguments because emotions get in the way.

2. At all possible, please avoid emotional confrontations. I discussed this a little bit this morning in today's message. Rarely if ever do we communicate properly when we're heightened emotionally. Oftentimes we say things in a manner we would not like to say so or we say it in an address that is somewhat skewed. Anytime our emotions get involved and get heightened, it tends to escalate the rhetoric, it tends to heighten and sharpen the words that are being utilized, and what tends to happen is those emotions tend to default us into arguing and not negotiating.

3. Even though we know that someone who is not a believer of Jesus Christ, someone who has rejected the scripture, even though we know that they are in the wrong and we are in the right, we need to accept them as an equal. I didn't say the information as an equal, I said them as an equal. One of the most difficult things to do when sharing one's faith with one who is skeptical and critical and argumentative about the faith is to realize that Jesus Christ loves them just as much as he loves you, that Jesus Christ went to the cross for them as much as he did for you, and Jesus Christ rose from the dead for them as much as he did you. So therefore even though the information that they communicate is erroneous, even though it is deficient, the messages may not be equal but we have to remember that the person that we're talking with is.

Fourthly, to exercise gentleness. You know, there are several passages in the Bible where it talks about the Apostle Paul and others wanting to come in with a sledgehammer but using a feather, and what I mean by that particularly in 1 Corinthians 3, he comes to these early believers in the church at Corinth and what he's using as an analogy is dietary foods. He said, "You know you should be able to digest filet mignon but I'm having to give you Cheerios, and the reason I'm having to give you Cheerios is because you haven't

grown up, your stomach hasn't matured enough, you haven't in the spiritual realm grown to the point where you should have." And even though the Apostle Paul called it out, he even makes the statement that he was gentle to them as a nurse would bringing a patient back to health. You can say the same about Hebrews 5 and 6 as well.

Exercising gentleness oftentimes means refraining one's tongue. Allow me to illustrate. There are a lot of conversations I've had with nonbelievers where for every piece of information they have against the faith, I've got 10 that is for it. For every statement that they claim is true about Christianity, I've got 10 that say they're wrong. And there is a part of my flesh who wants to rise up and just start bashing but what good does that do anybody? My goal should be to win them not just to walk away and say, "Pfft, I knew I was right." There's a big difference, is there not?

Last but not least, check your motivation. Why are you in the conversation? Why do you continue to discuss? Why are you "debating"? Many of you have heard me use this analogy before but I think it is appropriate again this evening, the analogy is of a bridge that spans a great chasm, and on one side of the bridge are those who are lost, they are separated from Jesus Christ, they're going their own way, false religions, false ideas, atheism, you name it, they're claiming it, they've got it all. On the other side are you and I as believers in Jesus Christ and there is a bridge between the two of us. I think oftentimes even in our contemporary culture, we think that the best "evangelism" style is to yell at them, "You're wrong, I'm right!" By the way, the more that they reject it, the louder we tend to get, do we not? Hey, I've got a little secret for you: they are wrong and you are right, and the more you scream and the louder your scream does not change the facts.

Is the motivation simply to prove I'm right and you're wrong? Is the motivation simply to say, "I told you so"? Or is the motivation to see them come to the right side of the bridge? You see, if that is our motivation, then rather than screaming and yelling and calling them out, it becomes more of a, "Hey, can we have a conversation and discuss this?" You remember that the Ethiopian eunuch was led to the Lord by Philip in a chariot one day in Acts 8. Philip never raised his voice, never told him, "How could you get to this age and not believe what is right?" Never chastised him for not understanding what he was reading. He listened, he heard, he spoke and the Lord moved.

So what about these excuses? Well, tonight for the sake of time and the fact that everybody wants to enjoy supper and go to bed, I'm not going to deal with every excuse that those that are contrary to the faith have used in time or that have been utilized in my life, but I want to deal with four. These are four of the excuses or four of the things or the rationale that not only I personally but we as a culture of believers tend to have to deal with the most. I'm going to deal with what I consider the most frequently used excuse and work my way from there.

1. Hypocrites in the church. You know the old phrase, if I had a penny for every time I heard that, I'd be a billionaire. Wow. How many times have I heard somebody criticize, chastise not only who Jesus is, the Bible, faith, Christianity, because we're a bunch of hypocrites. I've got news for you: we are. I mean, it's not like they're lying about us. The

problem is if you want to set your standard for whether you embrace or don't embrace something based on the hypocrisy of those who promote it, then you won't embrace or support anything in this life. I've got news for you: those in the medical field are hypocrites, those in the educational field are hypocrites, those in the academic field are hypocrites. Every field has hypocrites. To promote one thing but then to do another, to advocate that others do as they are not willing. If someone is going to advocate, "I cannot believe or I cannot follow anybody or anything that is hypocritical," then you won't do anything anywhere. Our young people will testify there are teachers who have told them, "Don't worry, you're not going to be tested on this." And then come the next test, it's on there. Hypocrites. Dentists tell us, "Don't worry, it's not going to hurt." Hypocrite. I could belabor the evening but I think you get the point. In other words, when somebody comes and says, "I can't believe in Jesus because of hypocrites," they're actually being the hypocrite because they're willing to go into the medical profession, the academic profession and others who consistently fall into the same trap as even we, the believers in Jesus Christ do.

2. The excuse, "Well, surely there must be many ways to God." And what the underlying premise of this is, how can you claim, this is the skeptic's speech, "How can you claim that someone who is zealous, somebody who is passionate about their faith even if it's not your faith, how can you claim that they are wrong? I mean, after all, there are people of other faiths that are more zealous for their faith than you are for yours, so surely one day when they breathe their last breath, the Lord is going to accept them. I mean, come on, there's got to be multiple ways." Last time I checked, that zeal, passion and excitement has absolutely nothing to do with truth. You and I tonight could establish a coalition, we could gather up and we could organize ourselves and we could begin to rally, we could become a new group that is passionate that $2+2=5$. I mean, we could get banners, we could get shirts, a website, social media, and I mean, we can holler until we can't holler anymore. It seems ridiculous, correct? But the fact of the matter is just because you're passionate about it doesn't mean it's right. Just because you're zealous doesn't mean it's true. And when we start speaking about multiple ways to God, just like when $2+2=4$ and not 3, 5 or any other answer, those who would use that excuse fall victim to the same issue. They would never allow that in their own respective professional or personal lives, then why must it be forced upon Christianity?

3. The fact that the historical church has "sponsored atrocities." Now I could camp out here for a very long time but I will try to be brief tonight. When you look back on 2,000 years of biblical Christianity, I've got news for you, we haven't always behaved. We haven't always made the right decisions. And oftentimes, in fact, to this very specifically used excuse, oftentimes those who were the most violent and the most vile in the name of Christianity if you really peel the layers away, they weren't even believers to begin with. They were using the name or the auspice of Christianity to simply promote their agenda or to somehow push their goal or their desire.

So you hear, "Well, if you look back in time, it's the Christians that started this war and the Christians that started that war, and they did this and they did that," you know that term "Christian" is a loosely used term, is it not? Were those really individuals who

believed they had a sin condition, asked Jesus to save them and wanted to see everybody in heaven and not hell one day? Or those people that had a political agenda, a socioeconomic agenda, whatever it may be agenda, and in those days if you just tacked Christian on it, it somehow made it plausible and feasible? In other words, you've got to look at who were these people really and were they actually Christians or did they just claim a name that was unfitting of them?

Fourth, the issue of science conflicts with scripture. I have this conversation numerous times and on a regular basis is how do we reconcile science with scripture. Well, I can make it real easy for you: the Bible is not a scientific textbook, however, I believe there's not a scientific discovery that you'll find that is in conflict with scripture. The Lord is so brilliant and so wise that he has given us just enough specifics to be vague about it. There is nothing that we can find in a microscope or a telescope that somehow defeats the fact that we came from God and one day we'll return unto him as well. There are all kinds of scientific discoveries that are made every single day but nowhere in the Bible will you find a statement that specifically contradicts that discovery.

Now that is one of many specifics we could use so allow me to give you kind of a tactic here. It's not specifically mentioned on your outline. When somebody says, "Well, there's just hypocrites in the church, the atrocities of the church, the scientific conflicts with scripture," can I give you one of the best responses to that? "Hey, I hear you, friend, can you name one specifically?" You see, oftentimes those excuses are emotional rhetoric to try to get us off base when really they don't have the specifics. A scientific thing that goes contrary to scripture, "Okay, can you name me one? Can you name two?" Oftentimes it is stammering and stuttering that comes in response.

So in conclusion, what should our principles of witnessing be whether one is churchied, unchurchied, radical or un-radical, using the excuses or not? First and foremost, if you're going to share your faith with somebody, if we as a church are going to share our faith with our community collectively as a body, number 1, we have got to commit to a relationship with that person. There's an old adage you may or may not have been aware of this that says that which you win them with is that which you keep them with. In other words, if we win people with the gospel, it is the gospel that keeps them. If we win them with love, it is love that keeps them. There's also another statement that says this, nobody cares what you know until they know that you care. If we're not willing to have a genuine authentic relationship not just 1:1 but even with the community that we as a church have the privilege of living in, if we don't want to live life alongside of them, then our message will just be, as the Bible says, a clanging cymbal.

2. Know your faith and theirs. Now I want to qualify this. There are a multiplicity of faiths that are out there and I don't want you to go home tonight and say, "Oh my, I've somehow got to learn the tenets of every false religion, every cult, every sect, everything that is out there." No, no, no. All you need to do is become like those who specialize in the art of forgery whether it is with antiques, currencies, whatever it may be, you know the real thing so well that the forgery just stands out when it is presented. One of the best ways to know what is a false faith is to know more of what is a real or true faith. So

committing to a relationship, a real authentic one with others, knowing what you actually believe and not just regurgitating what somebody told you, you believe.

3. It sounds like kind of a strange word but it's a very good word: be presuppositional. Now let me unpack that very briefly. Presuppositional means this, it means that rather than trying to claim you're always right, bring up questions to show that the other person can't be right. For example and I'll keep this very just mundane, there are times, not that you would ever get involved in this conversation, where people want to claim that their sports team is better than yours. God forbid. And we always throw around wins and losses and yards and this and all kinds of things, at the end of the day it doesn't do any good. Presuppositional says statements such as this, "Well, if your team is really better than mine, then how do you explain they lost that game? If your team is really better than mine, then how do you explain this statistic? If your team is really better than mine, how do you defend this?" Do you see what presuppositional is? It's not arguing and claiming you're right, it's bringing up areas in the other person's position that they may not have considered that for lack of better terms just kind of chisels away at their argument. "You claim that there's other ways to God other than Jesus Christ? Then how can you defend two truths that are opposite both being accurate?" You see kind of how that works being presuppositional.

The fourth one is this: do not begin by attacking the other person's belief system. How do you feel when somebody enters a conversation with you by immediately stating you're wrong? What happens? Get on the defensive, right? Let me go back to the sports analogy. It's very well-known in our community. When someone entertains you in a conversation regarding college football, what is your first thought when they're wearing a t-shirt that says your team stinks? Now do you see how that works? Immediately your defenses are up, immediately your emotions run high, and you're looking for a fight, right? That's how it works. Well, if you attack that faith, I mean, I want you to imagine how would it go if you walked into Walmart with a t-shirt that said, "Muslims are wrong"? You won't be having any gospel conversations with Muslims that evening. However, a t-shirt that says, "Jesus saves," still true, is it right, but a completely different approach.

Fifth, share your own testimony. You know, there's all kinds of facts and figures and discussions and debate points but as I shared with you a couple of weeks ago, the most convincing apologetic is the testimony of a transformed life. At the end of the day we can argue history, facts and positions of belief but the one thing you can't argue is like in John 9 when they came to this man and said, "We don't understand, how did Jesus do this? It was on the Sabbath day. We don't get it." Do you remember what his response was? "I don't understand either. All I know is I used to be blind but now I can see." A transformed changed life is hard to refute even in the midst of supposed information.

And last but not least: explain the gospel clearly, simply. There's no need to make that which couldn't be confrontational confusing at best. You know, I've defined evangelism as one beggar telling another beggar where to find food but the simplistic explanation of the gospel is this: humanity has a sin problem, Jesus loved us enough to be willing to come and pay the price for our sin problem, and if we believe upon him, we shall be

saved. "But what about this?" I get that. "Well, what about that? Well, how do you deal with...?" Yes, those are all issues and excuses but the gospel needs to be explained clearly that humanity has a sin problem that only Jesus can solve.

Today, we live in a world that is probably 90% at least lost. We live in a world that is overwhelmingly majority unchurched and I think one of the great travesties is that they might know what the "Christian or Baptist or this opinion is on this subject, that subject, this concept or that concept," but how often, or shall I say how rarely do they actually hear the gospel? In the book of 1 Corinthians 9, the Apostle Paul in the midst of a culture very similar to ours made a very simple statement. He said, "I didn't come preaching this, I didn't come preaching this, I came preaching Christ crucified." Yes, we must respond to the issues, yes, we must deal with the excuses, but it is of no good if we don't explain the gospel clearly.

Let's pray with our heads bowed and our eyes closed. Tonight, you may be one of those whether in person or online who understood for the very first time that you've believed a false gospel. Maybe you thought you knew what Christianity was, maybe you thought it was about doing good, not doing bad, going to church, not going to church, giving, not giving, but maybe tonight you understood, "No, it's about I've got a sin problem that only Jesus can fix." If you're that person this evening wherever you find yourselves, can I implore you to do what Romans 10:13 says, just call on the name of the Lord, cry out that you're a sinner in need of saving. Tonight, as we come to our time of decision, maybe you're that individual who's been saved for years and even decades and maybe tonight you would be honest with God and yourself enough to understand that we get caught up in the peripherals, we get caught up in the tangent things and rarely is the gospel actually preached, promoted and spoken, usually it's some position on this or that, and maybe tonight it's not about the need to be saved but the understanding of what we must share for those who need saving.

Lord Jesus, as we come to this time of decision, thank you, thank you that you've made it so simple, thank you that you came to rescue us even though we have such a track record of going off course. God, tonight your mercy, your grace, your goodness and your love has been so demonstrated that while we were yet sinners you were willing to die for us. May we keep that as the focus. It is in the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.