

WHY I (STILL) BELIEVE...

length to the speaker. Later that day we heard that she had prayed to receive Christ. What began with a simple conversation, ended with a student giving her life to Christ. That's why I believe in evangelism: because the Gospel powerfully resonates with people's lives, when we take the time to listen to their questions, to engage and to allow the Spirit to work through us and our conversations.

FEAR OF FAILURE

But there's one last fear that often holds us back from evangelism and that's the fear that evangelism doesn't actually work, that despite our best intentions, hopes and wishes, the Gospel isn't actually effective, that the modern world is so hostile, so sceptical, so apathetic, that evangelism isn't possible anymore.

But that simply isn't true.

First, let's disavow ourselves of the idea that the modern western world is somehow unique. We forget that the first-century world in which the church began was deeply hostile to the Christian faith. Yet the church spread like wildfire. We forget, too, that in much of the world today, the culture is far, far more antagonistic to the Gospel than in the contemporary west. Yet despite that, look at how the Gospel has grown in China, or is growing in the Muslim world, or in some of the most difficult trouble spots of the world.⁶

Second, one of the things we love to tell at times are Christian horror stories. We love to sit around and bemoan how the church is shrinking, how the culture is going to hell in a handcart, how the media is increasingly secular and so forth. Maybe some of those things are true, but such stories neglect the work of what God is doing and how there are green shoots everywhere. One of my friends wrote a book just last year looking at the amazing stories of where the church is growing in the UK and Europe—he called it *God's Unwelcome Recovery*—'unwelcome' because many secular voices dislike it, but also 'unwelcome' because many Christians

6. See Lamin Sanneh, *Whose Religion is Christianity?: The Gospel Beyond the West* (Eerdmans, 2003)

have bought into the idea that the church is dying—maybe because sometimes it’s tempting to hide behind such a myth.⁷

There are many reasons I believe in evangelism—

- because the Gospel is true
- because it’s powerful
- because it engages people’s honest (and dishonest) questions

But primarily I believe in evangelism because it works—not in a naively pragmatic sense, but because time and time again, I’ve seen that when the Gospel is preached in a way that engages people, God shows up. The question isn’t whether evangelism is effective: the question is whether we still believe this. And if not, why not?

But tied up in all of this is one last question. What do we think the Gospel *is*?

Perhaps you think that’s an obvious question, but the more I’ve wrestled with some of the issues in this chapter, the more I’ve realised that at times we have a tendency to lose track of what the Gospel is. Without realising it, we slip into Christianity *plus*: Christianity *plus* politics, Christianity *plus* moralism, Christianity *plus* our theological hobby horse. And when people reject the ‘plus’—for example, identifying Christianity with a particular brand of politics and then rejecting the politics—we mutter that the Gospel has failed, when what’s actually been rejected is not Jesus but a caricature of the Gospel.⁸

The Gospel, at its heart, is incredibly simple. The news that there is a creator God, who loves us and wants to know us, a God from whom we’re separated by our rebellion and self-centredness. But He is a God who chose not to abandon us, despite our rejection of Him, but stepped into history in the person of Jesus, lived the life that we should have lived and died the death that we should have died, in order to deal with our brokenness. And His defeat of evil and injustice was demonstrated by His resurrection—and if we

7. Sean Oliver-Dee, *God’s Unwelcome Recovery: Why the New Establishment Wants to Proclaim the Death of Faith* (Monarch Books, 2015)

8. See Bruxy Cavey, *The End of Religion: Encountering the Subversive Spirituality of Jesus* (NavPress, 2007)

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place our lives completely and wholeheartedly into His hands and say ‘Your will be done’, He will begin the process of restoring and remaking us, bringing us back into relationship with Him.

And that Gospel is free. It demands *nothing*. Which is where the problems start, because most of us have considerably more than nothing and want to drag it into the equation. ‘Hey, God, look at my efforts. Look at my hard work. Look my right thinking. Look how nice I am.’ Sometimes we contaminate the Gospel with our politics, or our self-righteousness, or our moralism—and these things stink, as all dead things do. And nothing drives people away more than a rotting corpse. Evangelism hasn’t failed, but some misrepresentations of the Gospel have. Maybe we should cheer their passing.

A few weeks ago, I took part in a dialogue at a Canadian university with an atheist professor—at least, the last time we dialogued, he was an atheist; now he self-describes as an ‘agnostic.’ As we dialogued in front of the capacity crowd, he shared how he had been raised in a religious home, but how as a young man he’d rejected that rigid religiosity, especially the way that it refused to entertain any questions. But as we spoke that evening, he said, with tears in his eyes, ‘I miss God. I *really* miss God. I wish I had the faith you had, Andy. I want to find my way back to that.’

I did my best to share with my friend that evening the story of what God has done in Christ—a Jesus who said ‘those who seek will find.’

There are many reasons why I (still) believe in evangelism. But the primary one is because in Jesus God has made the first move—stepping out of His comfort zone in the incarnation that He might meet us. And now He calls us to do the same, empowered by the Spirit, bearing witness to others of the wisdom, the truth, the reality, the power and, above all, the beauty of the Gospel.