

The Gospel and the Atheist

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[0 : 00] Well, hello Brunsfield Evangelical Church. It is a delight to be able to do this for you. I was going to say with you, but sadly, of course, we can't do that quite yet.

I'm all the way down in England, in Cheltenham, where I live with my wife Susie and our son Shasta. I know that we'll have friends amongst you. For those who don't know me, I have been in Scotland for the past 10 years and have just recently moved south.

And it is a delight to be able to serve you in this way as we look at how to engage our atheist friends with the gospel.

And I'm aware that I'm coming in in the middle of a series that you're doing on how to speak to people from different worldviews in a way that invites them into the wonderful life of following Jesus.

It is possible that you're attending this particular one in the expectation and perhaps hope that it will largely consist of me putting up ridiculous quotes from Richard Dawkins and deconstructing and mocking them.

[1 : 08] Now, I'm not necessarily knocking that. There's a place for it. But it has been done 100 times by men and women who are far better placed to do so than I am.

So I won't be doing that. I'm not actually convinced that the materialistic, evangelistic atheism of Dawkins and co. is what the majority of our atheist friends hold, though no doubt some of them do.

So you can just follow him on Twitter and read the comments. But this evening, we're going to do a little bit of hard work. What I want to do before we get started is to stress that the trick, as it were, to all evangelism is quite simply to know the gospel.

The gospel isn't going to change. Christ came, died, rose and will come again. He did all of that because we're under right judgment for our sin and need to be rescued both from our enslavement to our sin and from the judgment that is coming our way.

The gospel doesn't change. But how we say it changes depending on who we're speaking to. I'm going to pause and let you react to that however you see fit.

[2 : 24] I'm not talking about apologizing for the gospel or about hiding parts of it, about exaggerating the nice bits and fluffing up the hard bits. None of that. But when we say the same thing to different people, well, here's an example.

I'm going to see if I can share my screen here. If I wrote these words to different people. There we go. Is that working? Wonderful.

Looks like writing a happy birthday sign. Have I left enough space? Just about. Now, if I said that to or showed that to an English student, they might think I'm quoting Milton's Paradise Lost.

Talking about the pain formidable. If I showed it to a Frenchman, he might think that I discovered a wonderful new bakery and had just had some pain formidable, some wonderful bread.

If I showed it to Archie Winnington at Ingram, he would think that I was describing my latest wait session. Different people will react differently to exactly the same words.

[3 : 33] It's a very silly analogy. Probably wasn't worth it for the split screen. But there we go. Different people will hear different things from the same words.

Once a week, I have a Zoom call with a friend who lives in Nigeria, translating the Bible into local languages. And he told me of a disastrous translation story.

And he sent me the result. The following had been translated from the King James Version of Psalm 23 into the Tlingit language of Alaska natives back in the 60s.

Originally, in the King James, it had read, The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures. He leadeth me besides quiet waters.

That turned into, The Lord is my goat hunter. I don't want him. He knocks me down the mountain. He drags me down to the beach.

[4 : 35] Now, what happened was that the local whom they'd hired to translate appeared to understand something quite different from that phrase, I shall not want. And because he'd heard that wrong and understood that to mean I don't want him, that affected his understanding of the whole of the rest of it.

He then saw the idea of being made to lie down, not as being rested, but as being pushed down by a bully and then dragged to the beach.

You'll be relieved to know that the translation was rescued and properly done. But do you see what's happening there? Same words can mean something completely different.

That's what the translator understood that psalm to mean when he read it. Okay, so we understand different people hear different things when same things are said, which means that if we're going to keep the meaning of the gospel steady, we'll have to communicate it differently depending on our audience.

So let's go to 1 Corinthians chapter 1. Do get it open if you can. I'll read from verse 18 of chapter 1. Just give you a second. From verse 18, Paul writes, For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

[6 : 01] For it is written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart. Where is the one who's wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age?

Has God not made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe.

And this is the bit that's particularly crucial to what we're talking about. For Jews demand signs, and Greeks seek wisdom. But we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews, and folly to Gentiles.

But to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

So this is Paul saying something quite similar to what we've already said. The gospel, and especially the cross, will get different reactions from different people. The Greeks say how foolish it is to believe that God could become a human and die.

[7 : 09] The Jews say how weak Jesus must be to allow that to happen. They're objecting to the same thing, but in different ways. The gospel, you see, confronts every single worldview at different points.

And it does combat with it. But what we also see in 1 Corinthians, in verse 24, is that it also connects.

To those who are called both Greeks and Jews, they can see that there is indeed power in Christ. There is indeed wisdom in Christ, and far more than can be found on earth.

I'm nabbing that phrase, connect and confront, from a chap called Dan Strange, by the way, if you want to look him up and do some more thinking on it. So the gospel connects and confronts, and that shapes how the message is heard, and how the message is spoken.

And that's why Paul's sermons to the Gentiles can be distinguished from his sermons to Jews. But he's faithful to the gospel throughout. Now, all of that preamble is there, because atheism, what we're talking about today, isn't a belief structure.

[8 : 21] It's a belief, for sure, but not a structured one. There isn't a formula, per se, on how to evangelize to atheists. The last time I led an atheist to Christ was, as it happens, it was in Edinburgh, at a university mission week.

I met the guy on a Monday, and he wasted no time in telling me, that he thought there was no God, that the Bible was completely false, and the God within it was evil. On the Tuesday, he believed God was real, and that the gospels were true.

But he didn't become a Christian till the Friday, because his atheism wasn't primarily built upon the idea, that God couldn't exist. It was built on the supposition, that God was not worth following, that he was a homophobic, transphobic tyrant, who wanted to control women's bodies, and release men to do evil in the world.

So my carefully cultivated material, about the reliability of the dating of the gospel of Mark, wasn't quite hitting the bullseye, was it? When I was at school, atheism tended to be Dawkins atheism.

Christians are dumb and wicked. God is as likely to exist, as a flying spaghetti monster, et cetera, et cetera. And many people still find, his and his less shrill companions, arguments to be persuasive.

[9 : 38] We tend to call them antithest, or new atheists. But from my experience, from doing missions, I mean all around the UK, admittedly, normally with students, most atheists are functional atheists.

The most convenient worldview, is for there to be no God, especially considering that the God of the Bible, is at odds with their moral code. And actually here, I want to just take a step back, and explore, kind of what I mean by worldviews.

I'm going to go back to my iPad, and share this screen. And I want to draw, I'm afraid I'm terrible at drawing.

But what I want to do here, is examine what it means, or what I mean rather, when we say worldviews. And I mean, unsurprisingly, it's what we view, the world, that's what that circle is, what we view it to be, at its most basic system.

So we believe that, there are humans on Earth, that's us. Animals, birds are easiest to draw, and fur trees, they're easiest to draw about nature.

[10 : 57] So we'll put all of that there. And so, the question then becomes, well, where do we put God? And so, many Eastern religions, would put God there. Deists, might put God there, and say, well, God made the world, and he said, go, or bang.

But then, had nothing more, to do with it, or could have nothing more, to do with it, depending on, the belief structure. Christians, obviously want to extend that arrow, and say, well, God actually came, into this world.

But what we're talking about today, is this one. Atheism. Where the world is here, it exists, and there is no God. But what I want to do, is add something, to this diagram, and put just the word, morality, in here, into the structure, of the world.

I think, that diagram, might have been more useful, in my head, but hopefully, that's been of some use, to you. But I really wanted, to make sure, that we understand, that for many, many atheists, human rights, and other facets, of morality, are not something, that humans have come up with, but something, that humans have discovered, scientifically, many might say, it's part of the, unavoidable, makeup of the world.

So, if that's part of their, fundamental view of the world, then any new thought, that they're assessing, they're saying, how well it fits, into that framework. I think we need, to be ready for that.

[12 : 32] Many atheists, will hold to their, morality, with absolute steadiness, possibly, with more steadiness, than your average, Christian, simply, because it's at the heart, of their worldview. So, scientism, or materialism, is much more rarely, at the very centre, of atheist belief anymore, but it is still out there.

So, the questions, we have to ask, when we're faced with atheists, to whom we want to tell the gospel, which, by the way, is all of them, are, where does the gospel, confront this person?

And where does the gospel, connect with this person? And I think we're used to thinking, this is probably the same, for everyone. In fact, I think we tend to assume, that people have the exact, same hang-ups as we do, or as we did, when we were first looking, at Christianity.

For me, and for my friends, the doctrine of hell, was one of the biggest pills, to swallow, when looking at Christianity. But what do you think, is harder for a victim, of serious assault, to understand?

That there's eternal punishment, for those who do evil? Well, they've seen, and experienced that evil, in the worst way. And actually, that's quite easy, for them to understand, that, some things require, just, total punishment.

[13 : 56] Or do you think, they find it, perhaps harder, to understand, there's a way, for wicked people, to be forgiven, and to spend, eternity in glory. We need to, make sure, that we're getting right, what we think, is connecting with them, and what confronts them, because how we then, speak into those things, will affect how they, see the gospel.

And when you think of it, like that, it's no surprise, to realize, that for many people, affected by the, Me Too movement, which statistically, is a vast number of people, the idea of God's judgment, is a point of connection, not confrontation.

So if you go, into a conversation, about God's judgment, by umming, and ahing, and say, oh no, God's nice early judgment, is more something, we do to ourselves, et cetera, et cetera. Well then, we're holding a flush, but just playing, a single high card.

This is a chance, to say, how much, God despises wickedness, how other false gods, shirk their responsibility, to enact justice. And then, we bring that connection, to a point of confrontation.

We demonstrate, that God is so holy, that everyone falls short, of his standards, and that includes them. And people see this too, in the world around us, so we connect again, no one's uncancellable, are they?

[15 : 15] God then, shows mercy, so that those who do repent, of their evil, can be saved. Because that's what people, want to see. They are thirsty, for justice, and desperately, in need of mercy.

And until they see the cross, there's literally, no way for them, to be quenched, of both desires. Either justice, or mercy, has to suffer, until people see, the cross of Christ.

No way, at all that is, the power of God, and the wisdom of God, they meet there. That's where they meet. Look at someone, like Rachel Den Hollander, she's an American Christian, and victim survivor, of one of, the most prolific abusers, of the century.

Her testimony, and impact statement, at Larry Nassar's trial, did two things. Played a huge part, in putting him to jail, for the rest of his life.

And she also offered him, saving mercy. She was able to do, both those things, because of her, understanding of, the Christian view, of both justice, and mercy.

[16 : 25] And as a result, millions of Americans, following the trial, heard something of the gospel, and all over the world as well. Not on the periphery, of the gospel, but at the very center of it.

The universal offer, of forgiveness, from a God, who does not shy away, from justice. So things that we might, just dismiss as, cultural, important, but cultural issues, are never actually, that far away, from the gospel.

Let me take, another example, from what some, might disparagingly call, the woke movement, which by and large, is rather atheist. That word, by the way, is woke, is rather significant.

We might, come to that later on. But I wonder, if you guys are familiar, with the term, cultural appropriation. It's often raised, with regards, to white Americans, dressing up as, Native Americans, at Halloween, or Jamie Oliver, was accused of it, a year or two ago, when he brought out, his Jamaican, chicken recipe.

Well, what cultural appropriation, is, is when someone, makes something valuable, to them, then someone, from a different culture, takes that valuable thing, empties it, of all of its meaning, and value, and uses it cheaply.

[17 : 47] So, to take the headdress example, in the native cultures, around the Great Plains, the presentation, of an eagle feather, is considered, to be one of the highest, marks of respect.

They're so significant, that in many cases, only two or three, would be awarded, in a whole lifetime. But when enough feathers, are collected together, they can be incorporated, into a headdress. So, there's no real surprise, that Native Americans, are offended, when drunk teenagers, stagger about them, at music festivals.

And Christians, definitely know a similar feeling, when a cross is used casually, don't we? Now, obviously, I'm not here, primarily to talk to you, about cultural appropriation. But this is another, huge area of conversation, in which we can see, the gospel, is just waiting, to be preached.

It highlights, another area, where the gospel, connects with people, that we often miss. What does this, popular idea, of cultural appropriation, say it at its most basic level?

Well, it says that creators, have rights, over what they've made. It says that it's wicked, to take something, made by a creator, to then empty it, of its original value, and meaning, and to use it cheaply, against the creator's wishes.

[19 : 03] Which means, that if there is a God, then he does have, a right to judge. And we should look to him, first and foremost, when deciding, how to use his creation, whether that be, the world around us, or our own bodies.

Now obviously, you can see, we're heading to a point, of confrontation, fairly quickly. But that's good. We don't want to be, persuading atheists, that they already agree, with us on everything. Otherwise, they'll walk away, thinking that we agree nicely, and still not know, the gospel.

But do you see, the point of connection? Do you see how, in telling, the simple gospel, which includes, talk about human sinfulness, and God's judgment over us, a lot of the thinking, is already there, in people's minds.

If we can just, point them to it. I mean, atheists, modern atheists, many of them, believe very, very firmly, in progress.

Which is simply, a reworking, of the redemptive history, that we see in the Bible. There's certainly, no historical, reason to believe in it, as far as I'm concerned. We'll move on, because we don't have, a lot of time left.

[20 : 11] And all of that, was just to persuade you, the gospel is already, interacting within, people's worldviews. And we need to be, searching for those, areas. I've given you, examples, rather than formulae.

But as you engage, with your friends, as you listen to them, and understand their worldviews, be alert, to those points, of connection. The last thing, I want to talk to you about, is something called, defeater beliefs, which we've touched on, slightly, with my NAF, circle diagrams earlier.

I apologize for them. I'm not yet, confident with the tech. But a, a defeater belief, is put simply, a belief, which defeats, other beliefs.

So, some defeater beliefs, are moral. If I believe, that it's morally wrong, for anyone to make, a judgment, a moral judgment, on what someone else, does with their bodies, then that automatically, defeats the idea, of there being a good God, who will say something like, marriage should be, between one man, and one woman.

The Bible statement, that God made, mankind male, and female, is defeated, by other, other beliefs, morally. Other defeated beliefs, are more structural.

[21 : 22] I believe, everything is material, therefore, there can be nothing spiritual, or philosophical. I don't think, that atheism, is a belief, therefore, I'm not guilty, of any assumptions, an atheist, may well think.

So, it's our job, to locate, and get past, those defeated beliefs. And the only possible, way you have, of identifying them, correctly, is to live, alongside, non-Christians.

You might be able, to listen to a talk, like this, and have a good guess, but you might be wrong, and making assumptions, about their beliefs, which never makes, someone, want to listen to you, about anything else.

So, we need to be, making sure, that we're not, just speaking to, our past experience, of atheists, but we're speaking to, John, or Sue, or whoever it is, that's right in front of us, right now.

I'm, totally out of time, so let me just list, some things, that we need to have in mind. So firstly, live authentically, and don't apologize, for your beliefs.

[22 : 33] Listen, some things, aren't going to be, really off-putting, to people at first, as we live, as Christians in the world, and we are increasingly, having to get used to that. But if you apologize, for those things, and hide them, then when people, do draw near, those issues, that we've apologized, for in the past, appear then to be huge, cracks, fissures, in Christianity.

I know of one, pro-choice atheist, who could not believe, how little Christians, cared about abortion. This person believed, that a fetus, was simply a part, of a woman's body, but they said, if Christians believe, that we're killing children, then why didn't they do, or say anything?

I know that's a sensitive issue, and I hope, that hasn't upset, any of you, that I've used that, as an illustration. But this person, went on to say, sometimes it seems, like they're only pretending, to believe in Christianity, because they're not acting, on their beliefs.

That's just one example, don't dumb down, your Christianity, in front of people. Authenticity is a big deal, and it makes Christianity, look more like a club, than an authentic belief, built around a relational God, if we hide parts, of the gospel, hide parts of our beliefs, from how we live, in front of other people.

So, one, live authentically, don't shy away, from the hard questions, in a world full of taboos, people are thirsty, thirsty as anything, for genuine answers. Two, we've already covered this, in some detail, find out, where the gospel confronts, and connects with, people's beliefs.

[24 : 15] Which leads us to three, which is, know the gospel. You have to know the gospel, in order to bring people, to know Christ. And according to Paul, that's all you need, to describe your ministry, whether that's, to friends at work, or school, or in the neighborhood, or something more formal.

That's the only thing, you need to describe your ministry, as a success. At the beginning, of 1 Thessalonians 2, Paul says, that his coming to them, was not in vain. Why?

Because he had boldness, to declare to you, the gospel of God, in the midst, of much conflict. Friends, pray for courage. We need it.

But remember, that the gospel is true. All we need, to succeed in our mission, is to declare it boldly. And an eternity, with the Lord Jesus awaits.

Would it not be wonderful, to share that eternity, with someone to whom you chose, to tell the gospel? Pray for your friends, pray for courage, and take heart, that the gospel is true.

[25 : 21] Christ died, Christ rose, and Christ will come again, together all, who are his, wherever they are, right now. through the gospel.